CHINA REPORT

Volume No. 146 July 2025

ECONOMY

Machine Learning: The race to make robots more human

SPECIAL REPORT

High-altitude Health: Medical exchanges reshape Xizang hospitals

LOVE VIRTUALLY

How young Chinese are courting digital dates

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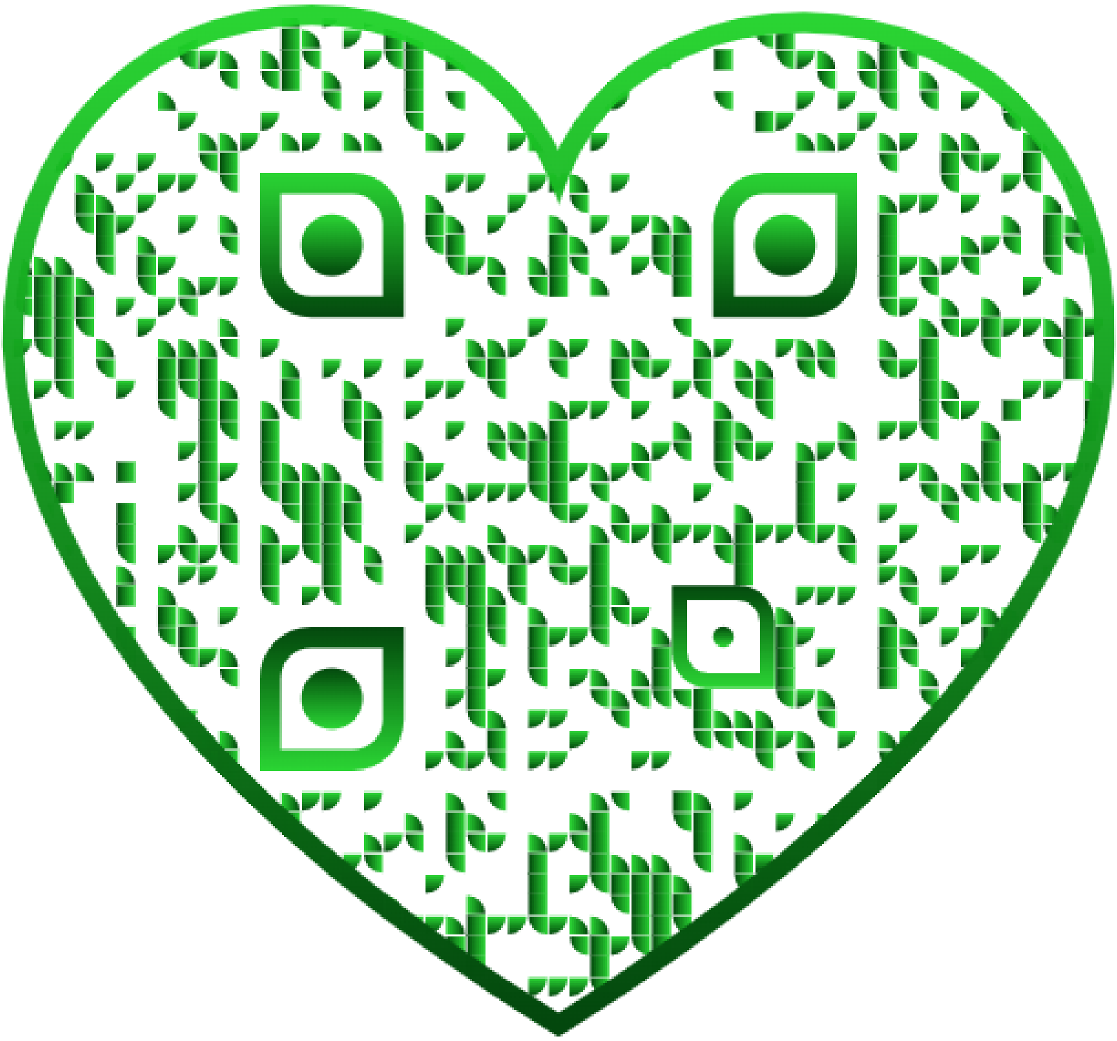

大醫論壇

2025 Britain-China Forum of TCM Masters

朱步先老中医
悬壶65年中医思想研讨会
暨2025英中大医论坛

Celebrating Dr Zhu Buxian's 65-Year Career and His Achievements in TCM

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山東中醫藥大學
Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medicine
Overseas Alumni

丹萸書院

China and ASEAN FTA 3.0 paves the way for a new era of regional integration

China's Ministry of Commerce announced on May 21 that China and ASEAN countries have completed negotiations on Version 3.0 of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA), following a special ASEAN-China foreign ministers' meeting held the previous day in Thailand. Negotiations on the latest iteration of the free trade deal started in November 2022, with nine rounds of talks and more than 100 working group meetings over more than two years.

> CAFTA 3.0 aims to rebuild regional industrial, value and supply chains, which is expected to enhance the resilience of regional cooperation

The timing of the negotiations' conclusion is particularly significant. In the past couple of years, the world has undergone intensifying geopolitical turbulence and trade protectionism in the West.

Compared with earlier versions of CAFTA, which primarily focused on tariff reductions and trade in goods, CAFTA 3.0 highlights new areas of cooperation, including the digital economy, green development and supply chain connectivity, which will become new engines of growth for both China and ASEAN.

More importantly, the two sides have shifted their focus to mutual recognition of standards and regulatory alignment. Rulemaking has been formally incorporated into the free trade framework.

In addition, CAFTA 3.0 aims to rebuild regional industrial, value and supply chains, which is expected to enhance the resilience of regional cooperation built on institutional openness and rule-based coordination.

While trade in goods still forms the backbone of China-ASEAN economic ties, the door is opening to the services trade, particularly in the finance, education, healthcare and digital sectors, driven by rapid technological advances and the demands of Industry 4.0.

Cross-border e-commerce, powered by the digital economy and AI, is playing an increasingly vital role, although both sides need to strengthen digital infrastructure and cooperation in areas such as customs procedures, data flow, cybersecurity and privacy standards to support a unified China-ASEAN digital market.

Sustainable development is another key pillar of CAFTA 3.0. China and ASEAN are expected to work more closely on building a clean energy market, linking carbon markets and enabling cross-border carbon trading. Institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund will play a role in financing green projects and promoting common infrastructure standards.

The two sides are also exploring breakthroughs beyond the region. On May 27 and 28, the inaugural ASEAN-China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which agreed on "charting a unified and collective path towards a peaceful, prosperous and just future."

China has maintained close economic relations with both ASEAN and the GCC. The GCC, which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has also recently strengthened its relations with ASEAN. The two regions held their first summit in Saudi Arabia in October 2023, and they convened the 2nd ASEAN-GCC Summit on May 27, before China joined for the trilateral meeting.

With a combined market of more than two billion people, trilateral cooperation among the three regions will mark a new wave of regional economic integration, boosting economic resilience across Asia and further raising the global strategic importance of China-ASEAN cooperation.

This means a stronger commitment to multilateralism, deeper market opening and greater alignment in standards and policies. ★

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Lonely Fans

Young Chinese people are increasingly finding romance in the digital domain. *ChinaReport* dives into the online world of dating, which is spilling offline, too

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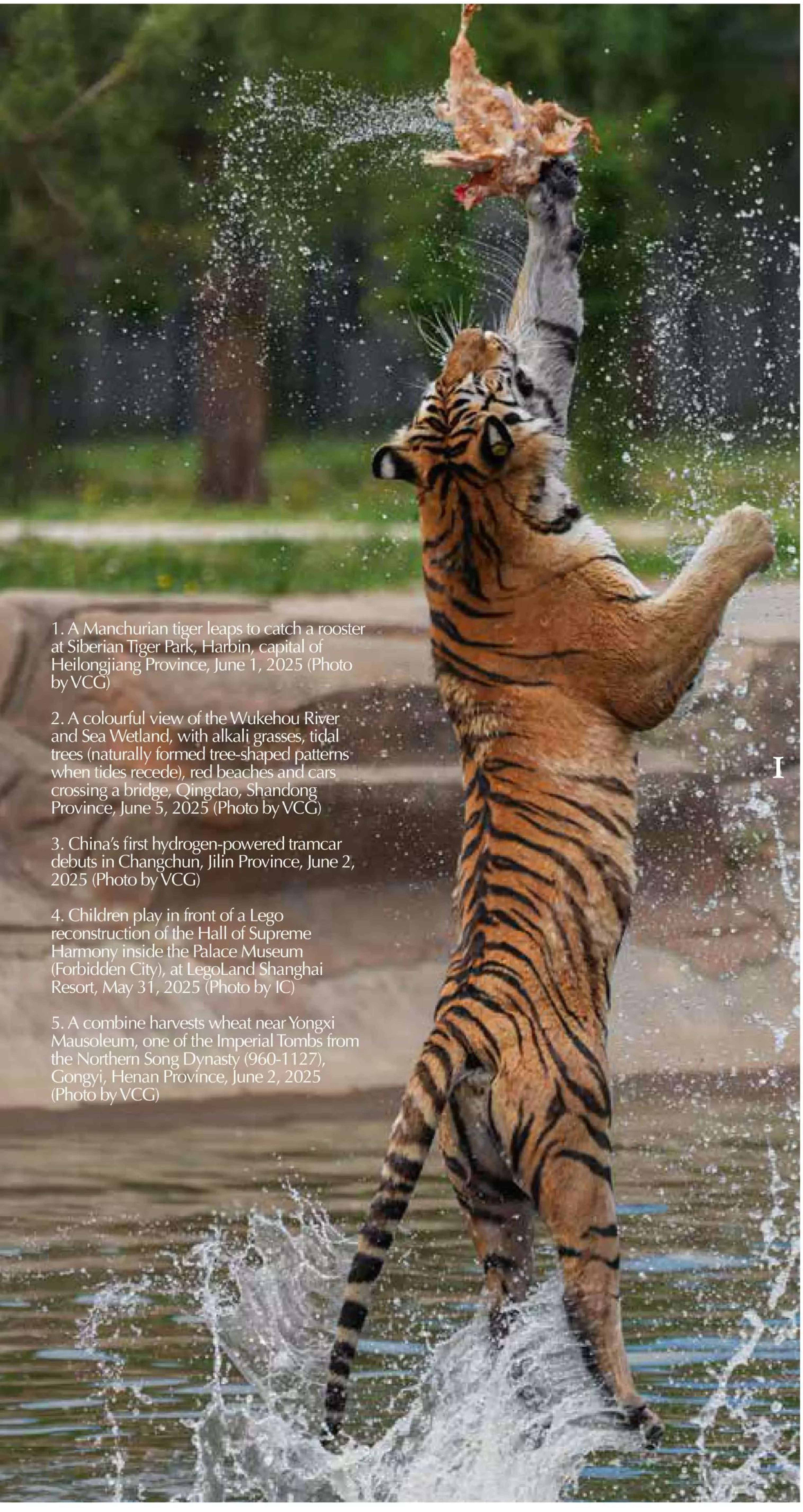

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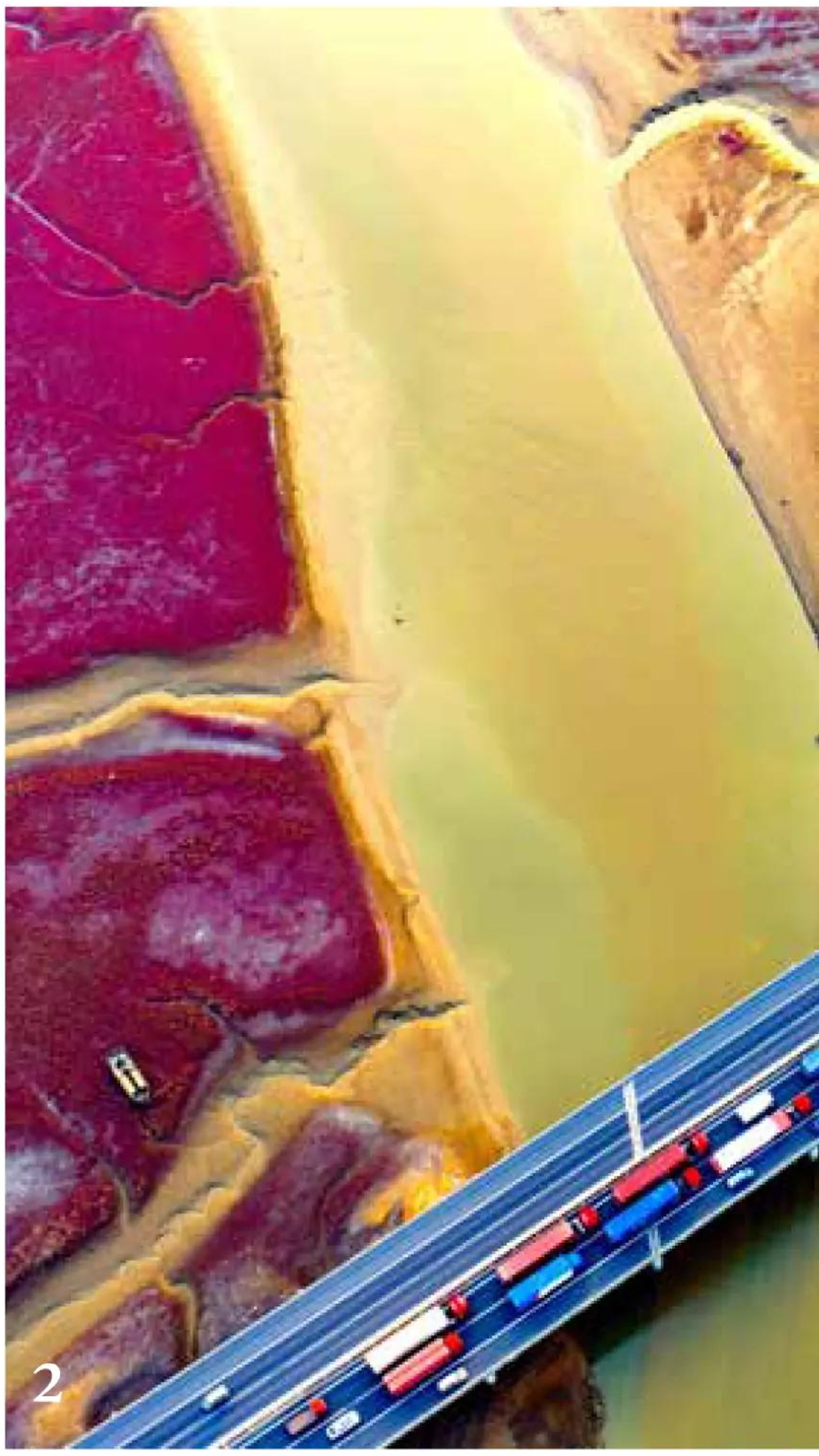

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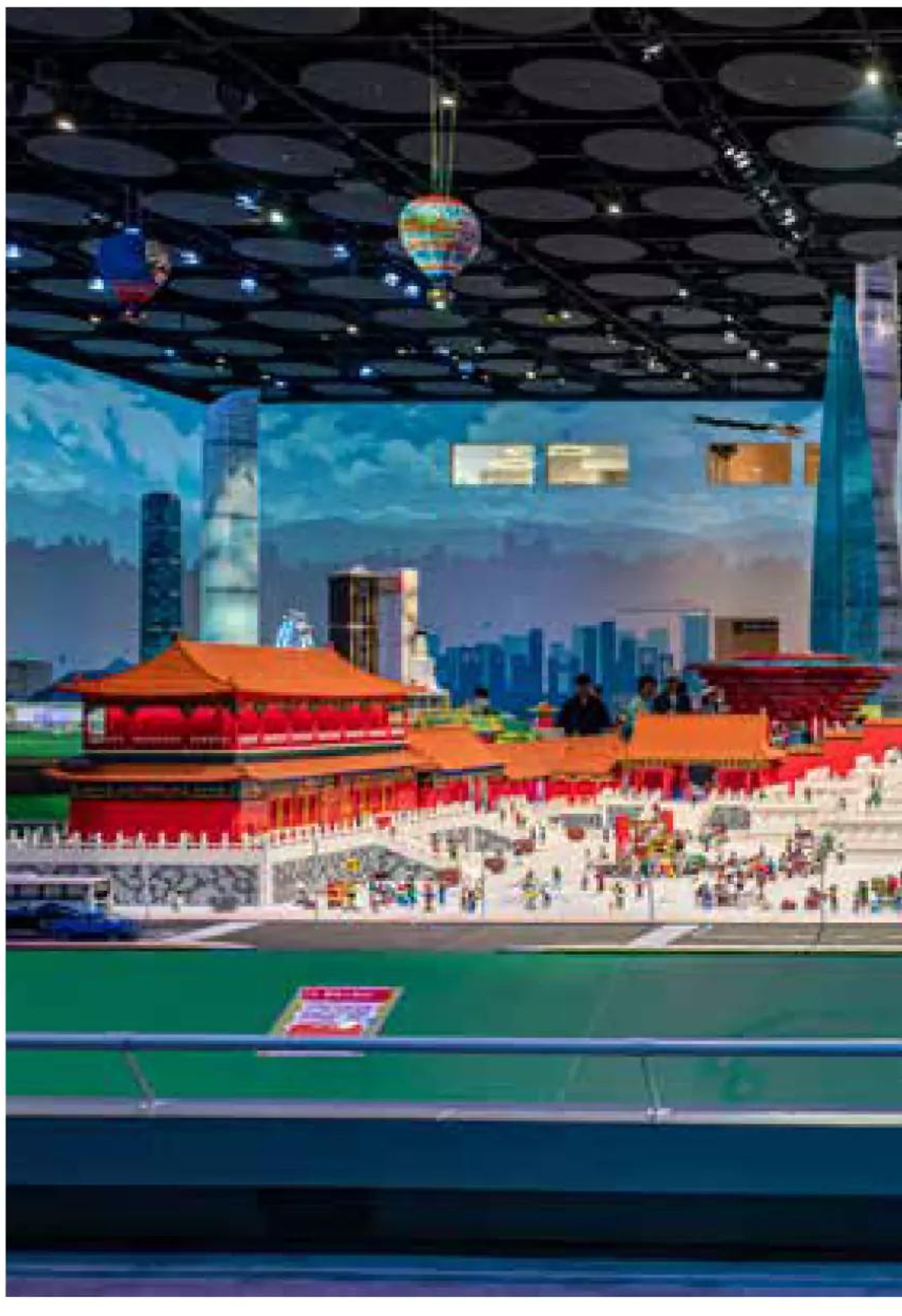
1. A Manchurian tiger leaps to catch a rooster at Siberian Tiger Park, Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang Province, June 1, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

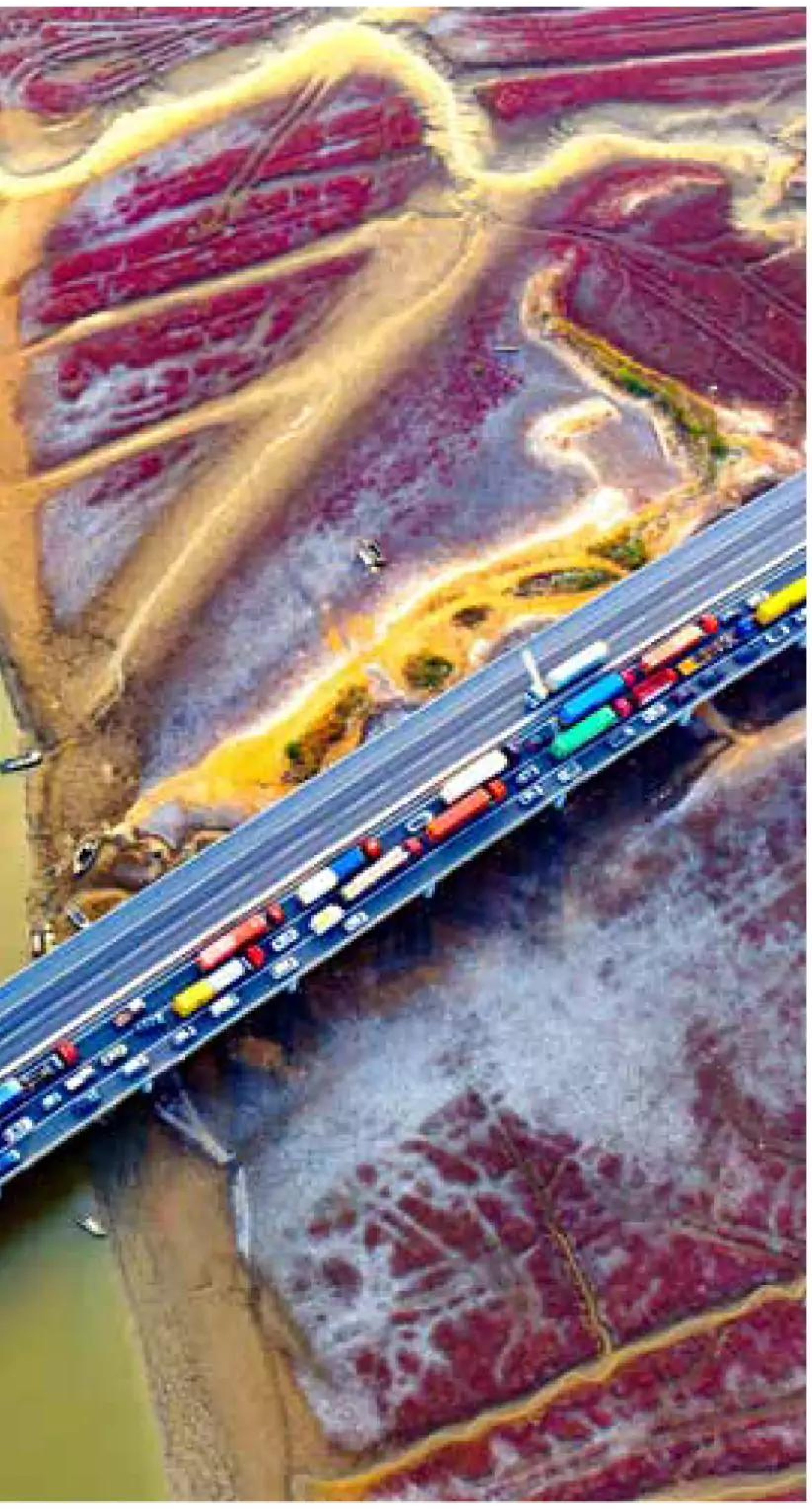
2. A colourful view of the Wukehou River and Sea Wetland, with alkali grasses, tidal trees (naturally formed tree-shaped patterns when tides recede), red beaches and cars crossing a bridge, Qingdao, Shandong Province, June 5, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. China's first hydrogen-powered tramcar debuts in Changchun, Jilin Province, June 2, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. Children play in front of a Lego reconstruction of the Hall of Supreme Harmony inside the Palace Museum (Forbidden City), at LegoLand Shanghai Resort, May 31, 2025 (Photo by IC)

5. A combine harvests wheat near Yongxi Mausoleum, one of the Imperial Tombs from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), Gongyi, Henan Province, June 2, 2025 (Photo by VCG)





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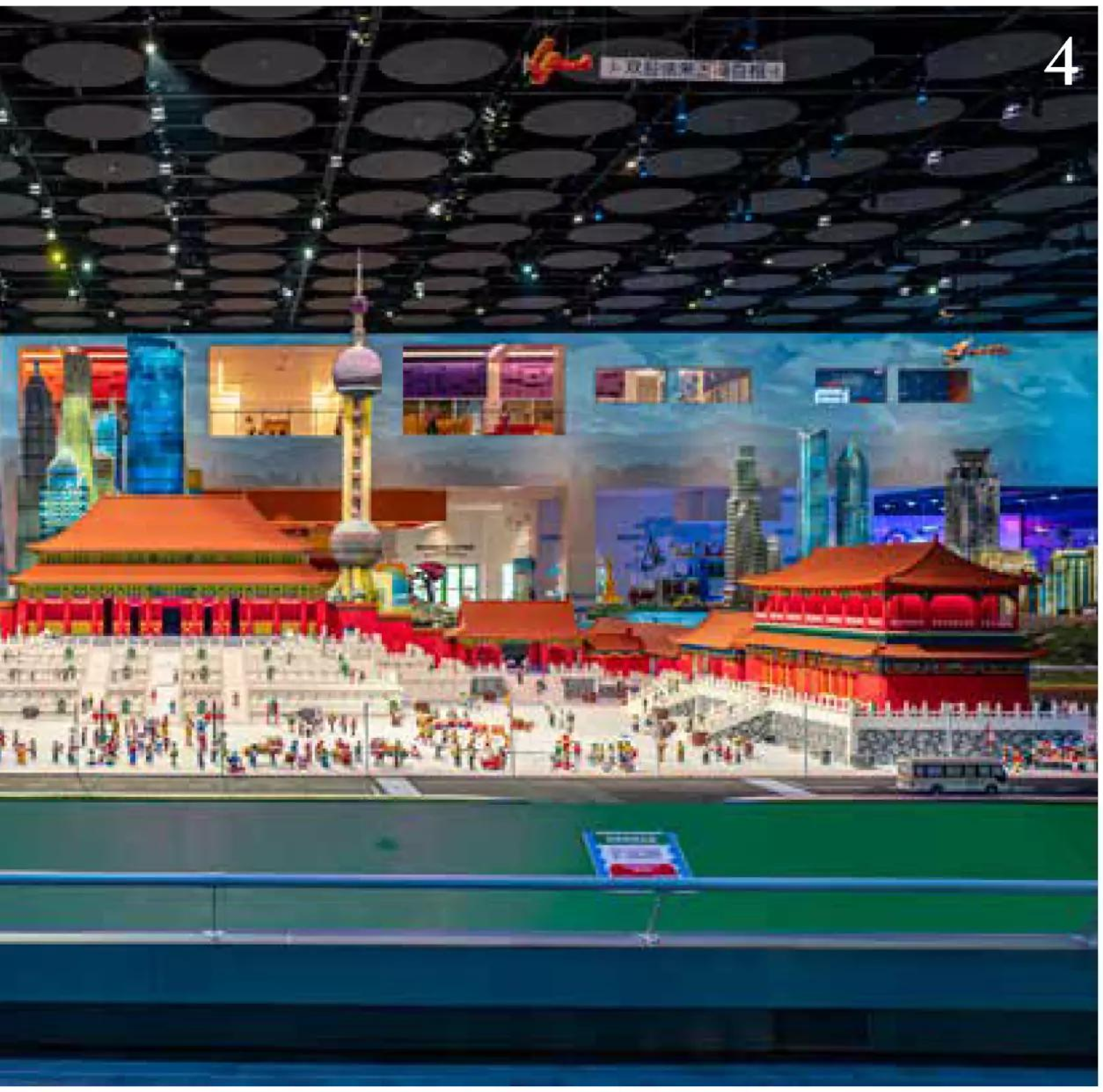

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1. The White Pagoda of Miaoying Temple in Beijing is lit up on May 22, 2025. Illuminated between 7-9 pm from Friday to Sunday and on festivals, the Tibetan Buddhist pagoda dates from 1279, and is the oldest and largest Buddhist stupa in China. Its construction was aided by Nepali architect Anigo (1244-1306) who visited China during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) (Photo by IC)

2. A Russian woman beats a drum in a dragon boat to keep time while competing in the Fuzhou International Dragon Boat Invitational and the Belt and Road Youth Dragon Boat Invitational in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, on May 30, 2025. The competition drew 12 teams with contestants from countries including Malaysia, Indonesia and Germany (Photo by IC)

3. New graduates rush out of Wuhan No.1 Secondary School under a shower of flowers and confetti at the end of the National College Entrance Examination in Hubei Province, June 9, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. People parade with two 12-metre-long crayfish models to celebrate the 25th Xuyi Crayfish Food Festival, Xuyi County, Jiangsu Province, June 12, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

5. A foreign passenger is ready to ride Beijing's subway with his American Express card on June 15, 2025. It was the first day that 29 metro lines in the Chinese capital, including two airport lines, could accept fare payments from internationally used cards such as Mastercard, Visa and JCB (Photo by IC)

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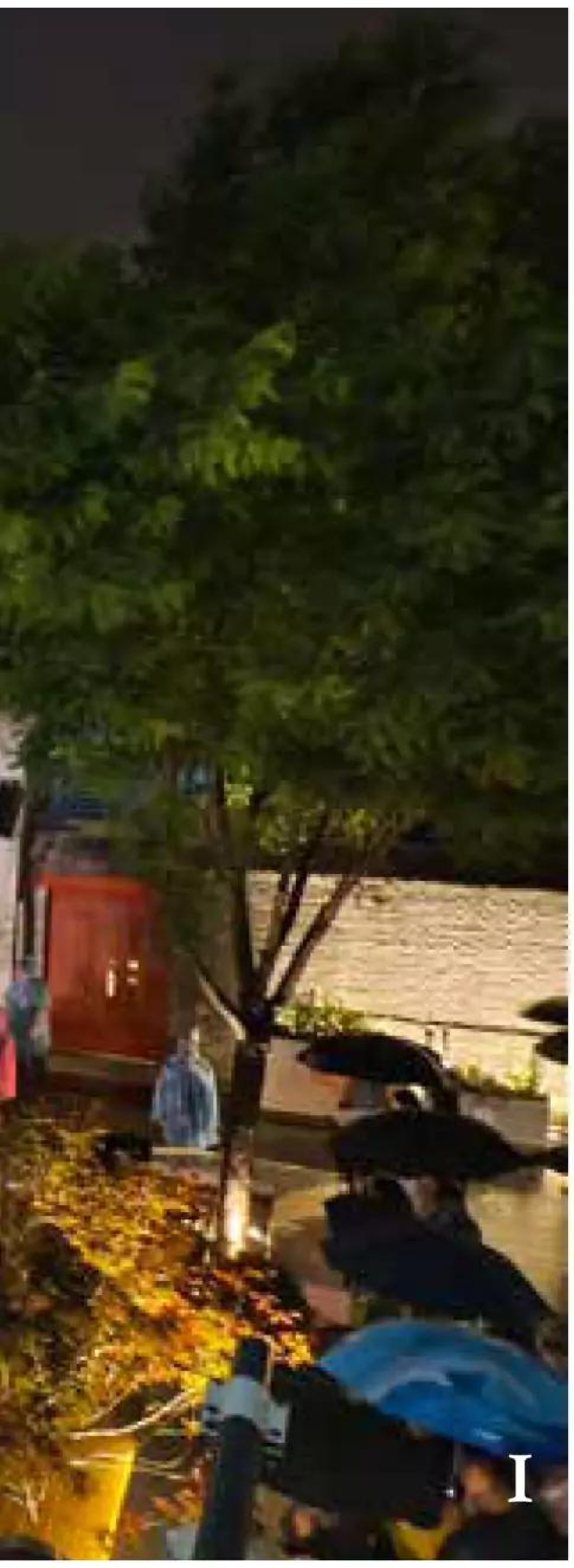
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AMERICAN EXPRESS

Ancient Oracle Bones Offer Insight into Western Zhou Capital

China Newsweek June 13, 2025

Ancient oracle bones most recently unearthed at the Zhouyuan Ruins site in Baoji, Shaanxi Province further challenge the *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian (around 145-86 BCE), who believed the capital of China's Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BCE) to be in Fenghao, a site to the south of present-day Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi. For more than eight decades, discoveries of oracle bones, bronze items and the ruins of a settlement found to be twice the size of Fenghao, provide evidence that Zhouyuan, corresponding to descriptions in the *Book of Songs*, an anthology of Chinese poetry, was the capital. Thought to be the largest city in the world at that time, more than 10,000 oracle bones have been excavated at Zhouyuan, second only to the Yin Ruins in Anyang, Henan Province, capital of the late Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE). Historians believe the capital was moved from Fenghao to Zhouyuan after the reign of Western Zhou founder King Wu of Zhou (1087-1043 BCE), who fought and defeated the Shang.

IPO of 2nd Biggest Stablecoin Supplier Triggers Market Fervour

Caijing Magazine June 9, 2025

Despite a temporary circuit breaker on June 5, the stock price of the Circle Internet Group, a peer-to-peer lender and issuer of the world's second-most used stablecoin, USDC, surged by 168.5 percent to US$18 billion on its first trading day. Stablecoins are much less volatile when pegged to a currency. First rolled out in 2014 by Tether, the trading volume in stablecoins hit US$27.6 trillion in 2024, higher than those of Visa and MasterCard combined. With its decentralised model for cross-border transactions involving no third parties, stablecoins may sideline the roles of banks. However, to avoid money-laundering and foreign exchange evasion, countries and regions like the US and China's Hong Kong region are legislating to formulate rules. As cryptocurrency remains illegal in the Chinese mainland, experts are urging China to join the market.

Multinationals Should Adapt Well to Global Value Chains

World Affairs June 7, 2025

As the principal trade partner of more than 150 economies, the third-largest country of origin of foreign direct investment and a major contributor to world economic growth, China has witnessed a growing number of domestic enterprises ascending to the top of the global value chain. However, when facing the global trade system that has been overturned by the trade war, increasingly fragile industrial chains and the EU's derisking strategy towards China, outbound Chinese enterprises should increase their R&D investment and dive into the communities of their target markets where locals can benefit by becoming stakeholders. Meanwhile, they can seek cooperation with companies that support free trade and economic globalisation. Experts suggest Chinese enterprises target different demands with precision, such as technological advances and rule formulation from Europe, and infrastructure needs, customised products and services in the developing world to maintain adaptability.

Rise of Female Scientists Narrows Gender Gap

Nanfengchuang Magazine
June 2, 2025

Like Chinese lecturer Wang Xiaoyun, who won a L'Oreal-UNESCO for Women in Science International Award in 2025 for her cryptography mathematics achievements, female Chinese scientists have increasingly important roles in China's scientific endeavours. In 2024, the number of female Chinese scientific and technological personnel hit 40 million, accounting for 45.8 percent of the total. Among them are Wang Hongyang, founder of the National Centre for Liver Cancer, Qi Xin, senior engineer of the China Spallation Neutron Source (a particle accelerator) and Zhou Xiao, the youngest assistant lecturer at the Gaoling School of Artificial Intelligence, Renmin University of China. Despite being resilient in their research fields, they are also versatile, passionate and capable of maintaining a work-life balance. Inspired by their predecessors such as Wu Chien-shiung (1912-1997) and Xie Xide (1921-2000) for their perseverance and audacity in leading scientific research in the face of gender inequality, more female scientists today defend their rights with their competence and achievements.

Stock Market Expects a Boost Amid Rate Cut

Weekly on Stocks
May 31, 2025

With a drop in China's deposit rates and loan prime rate in May, domestic mutual funds are expected to attract more individual investors to explore alternative approaches for wealth management. Meanwhile, when the risk-free interest rate declines, valuations of China's A and H shares are expected to increase, particularly for blue-chip and growth stocks. In December 2024, China for the first time in 14 years adopted a moderately accommodative monetary policy in response to internal and external pressures. Learning from the developed world, a market rate decline can trigger growth in the country's competitive sectors such as consumer discretionary spending, science and technology, manufacturing and healthcare services, though with the necessary prerequisite of a solid fundamental recovery. After individuals return to buy stocks, market fluidity and short-term resilience can be improved, but economists are still concerned about the potential risks of micro-trading for small investors.

"Although tariffs have been lowered, the US is unlikely to halt its efforts to decouple in certain areas... The 'small yard, high fence' strategy is expanding to cover more products, not only high-tech sectors where China is striving to catch up, such as semiconductors and AI, but also basic industrial goods like steel and aluminum, as well as essential items related to public welfare, such as medicines."

Huang Hanquan, director of the Chinese Academy of Macroeconomic Research, warning in an interview with financial news outlet Caixin that decoupling risks between China and the US still persist in key sectors

"The Trump administration threatened to impose varying levels of tariffs on allies and rivals alike, while aggressively weaponising the dollar's global privilege. These coercive tactics shook international confidence in the dollar as a safe haven and exposed the fragility of the dollar-dominated global monetary system."

Shen Liantao, distinguished fellow at the Asia Global Institute at the University of Hong Kong and former chairman of the Hong Kong Securities and Futures Commission, speaking at the 2025 Caixin Summer Summit in June

"Returning the world to a path of globalisation requires more than simply reviving the liberal order or continuing on the current populist trajectory. Neither model will succeed. Only the creation of a new international leadership framework offers a viable way forward."

Yan Xuetong, honourary dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, in a June 3 interview with news portal The Paper

"Fundamentally, algorithms aren't controlled by IT professionals, but by experts in electricity, infrastructure, coal, pharmaceuticals and other sectors... In practice, China is rapidly adopting AI in manufacturing, and many Chinese models are expected to emerge from that."

Ren Zhengfei, founder of telecom firm Huawei, in a *People's Daily* interview published on June 10

"Parents of each generation bear the imprint of their time, and how parents keep up with the times is a global issue. Children grow from copying their parents, and then shape the future of human society.

Columnist **Guan Xin** writing for news portal guancha.cn on June 1, calling "parental self-improvement" the most meaningful gift for International Children's Day

"Consumption and investment are often seen as a trade-off in the short term, but in the long run, they complement and reinforce each other... Ultimately, the choice is between consuming now or consuming less now in order to consume more in the future."

Yu Yongding, academic committeeman at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, speaking at the 105th China Macroeconomy Forum held by the Renmin University of China in Beijing in late May

"Cryptocurrency has evolved from a marginal tool for money laundering and speculation into an emerging mainstream asset class for large-scale institutional investors. It is now an integral part of the global financial ecosystem."

China Finance 40 Forum Institute, citing researcher **Zhong Yi** in an article published on its official WeChat account in June

"Don't let capital distort business logic by chasing short-term rise of market value and stock prices through price wars. Otherwise, when capital exits, the industry will be left a hollow shell, having lost money for publicity, and the pace of overseas expansion will also stall."

Party newspaper the ***People's Daily*** warning on June 1 against a new round of price wars among Chinese carmakers

Presidents Xi, Trump Hold Phone Call Conversation to Discuss Ties

On June 5, Chinese President Xi Jinping took a phone call from US President Donald Trump, reiterating that the direction of the giant ship of China-US relations requires both sides to take the helm and set the right course, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced.

Xi said the Geneva meeting held in May between the two countries marked an important step forward in resolving the relevant issues through dialogue and consultation, and that China and the US need to make good use of the economic and trade consultation mechanism already in place.

"The Chinese side is sincere about this, and at the same time has its principles. The Chinese always honour and deliver what has been promised. Both sides should make good on the agreement reached in Geneva," Xi told Trump, according to the Foreign Ministry.

Trump responded that the meeting in Geneva produced a good deal and that the US will work with China to execute the deal. According to Trump's social media post on the US Embassy website in China, Xi invited Trump and First Lady Melania Trump to visit China, and Trump reciprocated.

From June 9 to 10, a Chinese delegation led by Vice Premier He Lifeng, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, held the first meeting of the China-US economic and trade consultation mechanism with the US side in London during He's visit to the UK. The US delegation was led by Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

The meeting was one of the outcomes agreed at the Geneva talks held on May 10, where the two countries agreed to establish an economic and trade consultation mechanism.

In a joint statement released following the Geneva talks, both countries listed measures to ease tariff tensions and agreed on the importance of a sustainable, long-term and mutually beneficial bilateral economic and trade relationship, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Less than one month later, China's Ministry of Commerce publicly condemned the US for seriously undermining the consensus reached during the Geneva talks by introducing multiple discriminatory restrictive measures against China, such as issuing guidance on AI chip export controls, halting sales of chip design software and announcing the revocation of visas for Chinese students.

During the London meeting, He Lifeng urged the US to resolve trade disputes with China through equal dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation."Cooperation between China and the US in the economic and trade field benefits both sides, while confrontation harms both... There are no winners in trade wars," he said.

He added that the two sides should make better use of the China-US economic and trade consultation mechanism, and work to enhance consensus, reduce misunderstandings and strengthen cooperation.

At the press conference following the London meeting, Li Chenggang, China's international trade representative and vice minister of commerce, revealed that China and the US have agreed in principle on the framework for implementing a consensus between the two heads of state during their phone talks on June 5, as well as those reached at the Geneva talks.

Li said China hopes that the progress made at the London meeting will be conducive to strengthening trust between China and the US, and to further promoting the steady and healthy development of economic and trade ties between the two countries.

Qingdao Hosts Cross-border Multinationals Summit to Boost Cooperation

The sixth Qingdao Multinationals Summit was held in Qingdao, Shandong Province from June 18 to 20.

A total of 557 representatives from 43 countries and regions attended the summit, which was launched by China's Ministry of Commerce in cooperation with Shandong provincial government in 2019 to help cross-border companies better understand and invest in China.

Themed "connecting to the world and win-win cooperation," this year's summit offered a forum on high-quality development alongside other events and activities, during which new policies were explained and analysed and potential cooperation was discussed. Important issues like overseas investment, the silver economy and the low-altitude economy were discussed in dedicated forums.

At a press conference, an official from the Ministry of Commerce said the sixth summit was characterised as "being new," with about one-fifth of representatives attending for the first time. Emerging sectors such as modern finance and AI were the focus. The summit also saw an increase in the number of participants from emerging markets in the Middle East, ASEAN and Africa.

The previous five summits, according to official data, attracted altogether 421 World Fortune 500 companies and 967 industry leaders.

Second China-Central Asia Summit to Build on Achievements, Strive for Common Development

Chinese President Xi Jinping attended the second China-Central Asia Summit held in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan on June 17, where leading officials of the six countries agreed to work together to make continuous and new achievements in building a China-Central Asia community with a shared future.

The China-Central Asia summit was established in June 2022 when foreign ministers from China and five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – met for the third time. From May 18 to 19, 2023, China hosted the first summit in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, where the summit mechanism was officially announced to be held every two years in China and one of the five Central Asian countries in turn.

Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and foreign minister, said the second summit highlighted what President Xi called the "China-Central Asia Spirit," which signifies four aspects, namely practising mutual respect and treating each other as equals, seeking to deepen mutual trust and enhancing mutual support, pursuing mutual benefit and win-win cooperation and striving for common development, and helping each other in time of need and standing together through thick and thin.

Agreeing to uphold the spirit, the six countries designated 2025 and 2026 as the "Years of High-Quality Development of China-Central Asia Cooperation."

More than 100 cooperation outcomes were achieved, Wang revealed, adding that all parties will focus their cooperation on six priority areas of smooth trade, industrial investment, connectivity, green mining, agricultural modernisation and personnel exchanges to strive for more tangible outcomes. Meanwhile, Xi announced the establishment of three cooperation centres on poverty reduction, education exchange and desertification prevention and control. China also pledged to provide 3,000 training opportunities to Central Asian countries in the next two years.

The heads of the six countries witnessed the signing of a treaty on eternal good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation and an action plan for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, Wang said, noting that this is the first time that China has signed Belt and Road cooperation documents with all countries in a neighbouring region as a whole.

Trade between China and Central Asian countries hit a record high of 674.15 billion yuan (US$96.3b) in 2024, up by 116 percent compared with 2013.

International Scientists to Explore Life in the Ocean's Deepest Trenches

The Global Hadal Exploration Programme (GHEP), an international programme for hadal zone exploration, received official approval from the UN's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) in early June. The term hadal stems from Hades, Greek god of the underworld, and refers to the greatest ocean depths below 6,000 metres.

The programme led by the Institute of Deep Sea Science and Engineering (DSSE) under the Chinese Academy of Sciences since 2022 was designed to support the IOC's Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030). Scientists from more than 10 countries, including China, New Zealand, Germany, France, Russia, Brazil and India will explore trenches and fracture zones at depths from 6,000 metres down to the bottom of the ocean, up to about 11,000 metres, which are characterised by enormous pressures, low temperatures, darkness and frequent earthquakes. The exploration is expected to help answer questions on what the boundaries of life are.

The programme plans to cover 37 hadal zones, five of which are more than 10,000 metres deep. Scientists will study whether or not the creatures in different hadal zones have genetic exchanges and how they evolve. Scientists have already explored nine hadal trenches, including the Mariana, Kermadec and Puysegur trenches, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Climate Change Action Plan to Provide Standards for Key Environmental Targets

China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) in conjunction with 14 other government agencies released a national programme on constructing a standard system for fighting climate change on May 30.

The system will help China better fulfil its carbon targets and tackle issues around climate change. The plan will be tailored for different regions and industries to provide key standards for solutions to climate change, and is expected to boost inter-agency cooperation and coordination to promote better standardisation at various levels. The programme is also intended to help China raise its international influence by participating in the design of international standards.

The programme includes a framework for fighting climate change, covering fundamental abilities, easing climate change and adaptation. This details general terminologies and codes, calculation and monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions, targets for greenhouse gas reduction and utilisation, appraisal of greenhouse emissions as well as norms and management of trade in carbon emissions.

Experts said that the programme will be a proactive guideline for sectors to act ahead of risks.

A commencement speech by Chinese student Luanna Jiang Yurong at Harvard University sparked heated discussion on Chinese social media, dividing public opinion and triggering deeper conversations about privilege and fairness.

On May 29, 2025, 25-year-old Jiang, a native of Qingdao, Shandong Province, addressed her graduating class at the Harvard Kennedy School, where she earned a master's degree in international development. The speech took place just days after a US federal judge blocked a ban by President Donald Trump that would have restricted foreign student enrolment at the university.

Jiang made history as the first Chinese woman to deliver a speech at a Harvard commencement in the university's nearly 400-year existence. In her address, she called for unity through "our shared humanity" and "a shared future," expressing concern that "the promise of a connected world is giving way to division, fear and conflict."

Her remarks quickly went viral in China. Supporters praised the speech as heartfelt and idealistic, applauding Jiang's broad vision, empathy and global perspective. However, critics dismissed her words as lofty rhetoric lacking practical solutions, what some called a modern-day version of "let them eat cake."

More controversy emerged when netizens began scrutinising her elite background. Some accused her of benefitting from connections to gain admission to Harvard. According to online posts, Jiang's father, Jiang Zhiming, serves as executive director of the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation, and she allegedly received a recommendation from Zhou Jinfeng, the Foundation's vice president.

In response, Jiang addressed the allegations on Sina Weibo on June 2, denying she relied on family ties. She said her parents divorced when she was young and she had limited contact with her father. Jiang explained she submitted three recommendation letters: two from her undergraduate thesis advisers in economics and political science, and one from a former supervisor at Credit Suisse. While she did intern at the Foundation and received a letter from them, she said she ultimately did not use it in her application.

Harvard Grad's Speech Sparks Class Debate on Perceived Privilege

Netizen Comments:

- "Her tone felt like she was reciting poetry without sincerity. It came off as patronising and disconnected from the content."
- "We're tired of cliché platitudes. What we need are people who act on those ideals."
- "Honestly, I thought her speech was fine. If we can't even allow young people to talk about ideals, are we just raising a generation of cynics?

Source: RedNote

Media Comments:

Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief, *Global Times*: "The backlash towards Jiang reflects widespread public frustration with unequal access to social resources. In an environment of intense competition for education and jobs, more efforts are needed to ensure fairness and ease public resentment."

Source: Sina Weibo

Chen Weihua, EU bureau chief, *China Daily*: "Having a debate on Jiang's speech is fine, but it should be conducted in a fair, balanced and respectable manner, instead of launching a 'crusade' against her and her family, or turning it into a 'persecution.' A good part of Jiang's speech was on inclusiveness and tolerance, which are exactly what we need in today's social media environment."

Source: China Daily

Chen Jiang, commentator, *Zhejiang Daily*: "People are tired of vague and empty platitudes. Instead of worrying about the fate of all humanity, perhaps we should focus more on real, tangible issues like access to education and rising food prices."

Source: Zhejiang Daily

Parsing the Hubbub Over Labubu's Boom

Labubu, the goblin-like doll with a wide grin and quirky charm, is the latest global toy craze thanks in part to a wave of celebrity endorsements and social media virality. Created by Hong Kong artist Kasing Lung in 2015, Labubu first appeared in his graphic novel series *The Monsters*, inspired by Nordic folklore. The doll found new life in 2019 when Chinese collectibles company Pop Mart released it as part of a mystery-box collection, which adds an element of gaming to the shopping experience.

Labubu's global fame skyrocketed in April 2024 when K-pop superstar Lisa of Blackpink shared a photo hugging a doll. Soon, celebrities like Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, Emma Roberts and David Beckham followed suit, turning Labubu into a fashion accessory, collector's item and status symbol. On TikTok, the hashtag "Labubu" has racked up over one billion views.

Originally priced at 99 yuan (around US$14), Labubu dolls now command sky-high prices on the resale market. Common versions have tripled in value, while rare ones can reach 3,000 yuan (US$417). A limited-edition collabouration with shoe brand Vans, first sold for 599 yuan (US$83), has been flipped for as much as 16,000 yuan (US$2,225). The most expensive Labubu yet, a 51-inch mint-green doll, sold at auction for a jaw-dropping 1.08 million yuan (US$150,215) in June.

Experts and media point to "emotional consumption" as a key driver behind the phenomenon. Many adults say Labubu evokes childhood comfort and nostalgia, with its quirky design offering a sense of playful escape. The doll has become a source of emotional support, carried in bags, cars and office desks as a kind of modern security blanket.

However, not everyone is sold. Some netizens say they simply don't understand the appeal of what they call an "ugly" doll, arguing that the trend reflects a decline in aesthetic standards. Others warn of the dangers of blind consumerism, accusing Pop Mart of leveraging scarcity marketing tactics to fuel irrational spending.

INFLUENCER

Wei Dongyi

Reclusive maths prodigy Wei Dongyi recently made headlines after launching his first social media accounts, drawing an outpouring of public admirations but also concern over his health. On June 4, the 33-year-old assistant lecturer at Peking University's School of Mathematical Sciences posted a four-second self-introductory video on Douyin and RedNote. The clips went viral, racking up over one million comments within 24 hours. By June 19, he had amassed 24.6 million followers on Douyin.

Born in 1992 in Jinan, Shandong Province, Wei is a household name in China for both his genius-level mathematical talent and his ascetic lifestyle. He won back-to-back gold medals with perfect scores at the 49th and 50th International Mathematical Olympiads in secondary school. He went on to earn a doctorate at Peking University and joined the teaching staff in 2019.

Wei first captured national attention in 2021 after an interview showed him carrying a plastic water bottle and two steamed buns. With his unkempt hair and humble demeanour, netizens were quick to nickname him "God Wei," admiring his academic devotion and disregard for material comfort.

But the recent video raised fresh concerns. Viewers noticed that Wei appeared extremely thin and pale, and that several of his upper teeth were missing. On June 7, Zhao Pu, a former anchor with China Central Television, posted a video on Douyin urging Peking University to take better care of Wei and address his health issues.

In response, a representative from the School of Mathematical Sciences told Xinhua News Agency on June 9 that Wei suffers from severe periodontitis, which led to the loss of his teeth. The representative, who was not named, said that Wei has undergone annual physical checkups for the past three years, and aside from his dental issues, his results have all been normal. The university has arranged for staff to accompany Wei to several hospital visits for treatment and pledged to continue supporting him in managing his health.

Gen Z Seeks Temples for Calm, Cappuccinos

In a surprising fusion of the sacred and the stylish, temple cafés are becoming the latest lifestyle trend among China's Gen Z. Across the country, ancient Buddhist temples are opening serene coffee shops to cater to young visitors seeking a peaceful escape from their fast-paced lives.

With names that evoke Buddhist ideals, these cafés offer more than just caffeine. Yongfu Temple in Hangzhou hosts a café called Cibei ("Compassion"), Faxi Temple's café is called Muhuanxi ("Bathe in Happiness") and Taizhou's Longxing Temple offers coffee at Jianfo ("Meet the Buddha"). Visitors sip on lattes while drawing lots, browsing incense and purchasing Buddhist trinkets.

The trend has sparked a boom online. The hashtag "temple coffee" has garnered over 10.3 million views and more than 53,000 posts on the lifestyle platform RedNote. Critics and commentators say the rise of temple coffee reflects a growing desire among young people for tranquility, spirituality and mindfulness amid daily stress and uncertainty.

China-India Relations

Forging a New Chapter

China and India mark 75 years of diplomatic ties, reflecting on past challenges and achievements while focusing on stabilisation, cooperation and shaping a multipolar global future

By Ye Hailin and Li Ming'en

The year 2025 marks the significant milestone of 75 years of diplomatic relations between China and India. Over these years, the bilateral relationship has evolved from the hopeful dawn of friendship, weathered twists and turns, and now steadily advances amid a complex international landscape – each step leaving a profound imprint.

To commemorate this occasion, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian President Droupadi Murmu exchanged congratulatory messages on April 1, 2025. In his letter, President Xi noted that the historical course of bilateral relations shows that being partners in mutual success and a cooperative pas de deux of the dragon and the elephant is the right choice for both sides and fully meets the fundamental interests of the two countries and their peoples.

The 75th anniversary not only offers a chance to reflect on past cooperation and challenges, but also heralds a new phase of healthy and stable development. It opens a fresh chapter for these two ancient civilisations to once again join hands on the modern global stage, injecting new momentum and hope into world peace and development.

Complex History

In the 1950s, as newly independent nations emerged from colonial and imperialist oppression, both China and India were filled with enthusiasm and aspirations for self-reliance and nation-building. The two countries actively fostered friendly ties, engaging in frequent exchanges. In 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai visited India, and both sides jointly advocated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. These principles not only laid a solid foundation for China-India relations but also had a far-reaching impact on international diplomacy, becoming the norm for many nations in handling bilateral relations. However, frictions soon overshadowed their cooperation. After 1959, China-India relations gradually deteriorated, with border disputes and other contradictions coming to the fore.

From the 1960s onward, China-India relations entered a prolonged period of stagnation and regression. In October 1962, a large-scale armed conflict erupted along the border, plunging bilateral ties into a deep freeze. Hostility escalated, and diplomatic exchanges nearly ceased. Over the next decade, the lack of effective communication and sustained tensions in border areas kept relations at a low point. Both countries worked hard to ensure their respective security and development but struggled to achieve breakthroughs in their ties.

A turning point emerged in the mid-1970s. In 1976, the two nations resumed ambassadorial exchanges, marking the beginning of the normalisation of bilateral relations. High-level visits soon became frequent, with leaders' strategic dialogues charting a course for the future. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1988) and President Ramaswamy Venkataraman (1992) visited China, while Chinese leader Li Peng reciprocated with visits to India while serving as premier (1991) and later as chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (2001). Through sustained diplomatic efforts, mutual understanding and trust grew, fostering cooperation across various fields. In June 2003, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's official visit to China culminated in the signing of the Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation, injecting new momentum into bilateral ties. In April 2005, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India led to a Joint Statement announcing a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. During this phase, China-India relations made significant strides, with deepening economic and cultural cooperation and relative stability in border areas. By the turn of the century, relations had steadily improved, maintaining a stable development trajectory under the strategic guidance of both nations' leaders.

Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, October 23, 2024 (Photo by CNS)

In June 2020, the Galwan Valley clash erupted. The most severe military confrontation between the two sides in over four decades, it plunged relations into a sharp decline. The incident reignited border tensions and introduced diplomatic friction. During this period, China-India relations faced multiple challenges, with reduced consensus in multilateral forums and shifts in India's international stance. Bilateral ties entered a complex phase of strategic recalibration.

Under the strategic guidance of the two countries' leaders, China-India relations are currently on a trajectory of stable development. First, China-India boundary negotiations are continuously advancing. As of September 2024, the two sides had held 31 meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on Border Affairs, maintaining an overall peaceful and tranquil situation in border zones. Second, areas of China-India economic cooperation are constantly expanding. In 2024, bilateral trade volume between China and India reached US$118.3 billion, with China's exports to India amounting to US$101.7 billion, accounting for 15.69 percent of India's total imports, while China's imports from India were US$16.6 billion, representing 3.2 percent of India's total exports. Third, China and India maintain communication within various multilateral mechanisms, including the UN, the World Trade Organisation, BRICS, the G20, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the China-Russia-India trilateral mechanism.

There is also room for cooperation in areas such as climate change, energy and food security, reform of international financial institutions and global governance.

Complex Co-opetition

However, the two countries still need to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the military and security fields, and people-to-people exchanges have declined compared to previous years. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the cities of Beijing, Chengdu and Kunming had established sister-city agreements with New Delhi, Bangalore and Kolkata respectively, and direct air routes had opened between Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Kunming and New

Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. Due to border conflicts, people-to-people exchanges between China and India have shrunk, and the High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Mechanism established in 2018 is currently at a standstill.

In international affairs, both China and India are at critical stages of national development and share common concerns about international instability, with similar positions. However, it should be noted that India has a practical need to enhance its power and status in international multilateral cooperation. The current state of its relations with Western countries stands in deep contradiction to the ideal development of China-India relations. Judging from voting patterns in the UN, China's consistency with the US has long been at a low level, while India's consistency with the US in UN General Assembly votes has been increasing since 2018, especially in important votes, where India-US consistency has risen from 14.3 percent a decade ago to 45 percent. This indicates that India-US cooperation has far exceeded the bilateral scope, with increasingly frequent coordination and cooperation in international affairs, while India's stance is gradually diverging from that of China. Communication and coordination between China and India on major global issues remain far from sufficient.

China and India are engaged in complex co-opetition, and their bilateral relations are influenced by changes in the international landscape, with significant impact from the US. The 2017 Donglang (Doklam) standoff and the formal introduction of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the US have led to increasing convergence of US and Indian interests. Particularly after the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict and the US's urging of the Indian government to replace China in global supply chains, India has recalibrated its

Above: People browse a booth for Indian products at the China Langfang International Economic and Trade Fair held at the Langfang International Convention and Exhibition Centre in Hebei Province, May 18, 2018 (Photo by CNS)

Left: Indian technicians from Liuzhou Wuling Motors India undergo training at a Liuzhou Wuling Motors factory in Liuzhou, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, April 19, 2019 (Photo by CNS)

foreign policy. In recent years, there has been frequent high-level political interaction between India and the US, and India has held the most joint exercises with the US among its partner nations. Its defence procurement has soared from almost zero to US$10 billion in less than a decade, and civil nuclear cooperation has become a reality.

Recently, after experiencing tensions, China and India have again focused on stabilising bilateral relations. Intensive communication, exchanging sweets between troops at the border areas, restoring direct flights and facilitating visa procedures are all conducive to rebuilding mutual trust.

Future Expectations

China and India also have potential areas of cooperation, including counterterrorism and anti-extremism, clean energy, environmental protection, science, space, manufacturing and digital technology. Many positive factors can help establish a healthy and stable bilateral relationship.

China and India are the only two major Eastern countries and emerging economies with populations exceeding one billion. Their relationship has become one of the most important bilateral relations in the world today. In October 2024, at a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, President Xi Jinping pointed out that both China and India are ancient civilisations, major developing countries and important members of the Global South, and both are at a critical stage of modernisation. Looking ahead, the positive interaction between these two ancient civilisations on the modern international stage will be in the fundamental interests of the people of both countries, contribute to regional stability and meet the expectations of the Global South.

China and India should adhere to dialogue as a means of resolution, avoid conflict, and set a model for harmonious coexistence and conflict resolution between two neighbouring major countries. Regarding the border question, it is essential to maintain the communication channels which have established, such as the Special Representatives' meeting mechanism on the boundary question, under the strategic guidance of the leaders of both countries. Frequent dialogue should be used to restore calm along the border and, from the overall perspective of bilateral relations, actively seek appropriate solutions.

China and India should keep seeking common ground and mutual benefit and set a model for the common development and modernisation of two neighbouring major countries. China aims to build a modern socialist country with leading composite national strength and international influence by the middle of this century, while India has proposed the "Vision India@2047," planning to build a developed India within 25 years. The modernisation endeavours of China and India will serve as a source of inspiration for other countries exploring paths to modernisation. In this process, even with disputes, partnership will always outweigh competition and common ground will be greater than differences.

Looking back on the extraordinary 75-year journey of China-India relations, we have reasons to believe that the two countries have sufficient resilience to resolve disputes and build a more resilient bilateral relationship. Amid the current changes in the international order, China and India are not only centres of global economic growth but also emerging forces in policy decision-making. Taking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations as an opportunity, the two countries should implement the recent consensus built in bilateral interactions, continuously advance China-India relations on the track of healthy and stable development, and help build a more equal, just, democratic and balanced multipolar world order, contributing to world peace and prosperity.★

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DREAM LOVERS

From tap-to-kiss games to AI partners and blind date livestreams, digital affection is booming, especially among China's Gen Z. But is it healing loneliness or only feeding our sense of isolation in a hyperconnected world?

Digital Romance

A blind date activity is held in Huizhou, Guangdong Province, May 17, 2025. More than 100 young singles participated in the event, which produced 10 matches (Photo by VCG)

Islands in the Stream

Gen Z singles are ditching awkward setups for casual, livestreamed blind dates, where love, friendship and fish-headed bankers are winning hearts across China

By Li Jing

Wu Xiao, 25, tuned in to a livestream on a May evening, and was immediately taken aback.

Among the nine participants chatting in the group video call, a young, shirtless man was striking bodybuilding poses. He had the arms and eight-pack abs to back them up.

"Show us your back!" the others urged, and the man spun around to flex his lats.

Wu was watching Live Fully, Get a Blind Date, the most popular matchmaking livestream channel on lifestyle app RedNote. With more than 130,000 followers, the channel hosts group video blind dates featuring nine singles at a time, while thousands more watch the public streams.

Streaming on major Chinese platforms like RedNote, Douyin and Kuaishou, the format is a modern take on reality TV dating shows. But instead of meeting up on a tropical island or casting votes with roses like popular Western dating series, Chinese Gen Z daters hang out casually in a nine-grid video call, creating a more relaxed, low-pressure atmosphere.

Party of Nine

In public parks across major Chinese cities, traditional matchmaking corners are still a thing. The most famous is in Shanghai's People's Park, where hundreds of parents gather with placards advertising their children's qualities as potential spouses.

The placards read like intrusively detailed resumes, as these parents mean business. Many start with age, height and education before getting to economic status, such as income, car and property ownership. After that typically come the qualities sought in a partner, both physical and financial.

But the younger generation is increasingly turning away from these job-interview-style setups, opting for livestream blind dates as a more authentic way to connect.

Wenyi Matchmaking is the second-most-followed blind date livestream channel on RedNote with 79,000 followers. Its audience is also diverse, ranging from university students and office workers to university lecturers, divorced parents and middle-aged singles from China and abroad.

Each livestream session allows up to nine people to join a group chat. One participant usually acts as host or matchmaker, guiding the session.

Participants begin by introducing themselves and sharing their criteria for a partner. They are encouraged to showcase a talent to give others a better sense of who they are.

In one livestream, a young voice actress imitated familiar animated characters, while a musical theatre actor performed a scene from *Beauty and the Beast*.

Livestreams can last just a few minutes or go on for several hours, depending on how well things go. Viewers interact in real time, cheering on participants and encouraging potential matches. For Chinese New Year in late January, Live Fully, Get a Blind Date hosted an all-night stream that drew over 500,000 viewers.

Ye Linlin, a young woman from Lanzhou, Gansu Province, relocated across the country to Guangzhou, Guangdong Province for work after graduation. Being far from her hometown and social circle, she found it difficult to start a relationship in her new city.

She tried dating apps, but found many users were not looking for a serious relationship and often posted misleading profiles. She attended a speed dating event hosted by a local matchmaking agency, sitting down for eight-minute conversations with a dozen men.

"That was a frustrating experience," Ye said. "Whether a woman could find a date seemed to depend entirely on age, weight and looks. It felt like a job interview, only more brutal," she told *ChinaReport*.

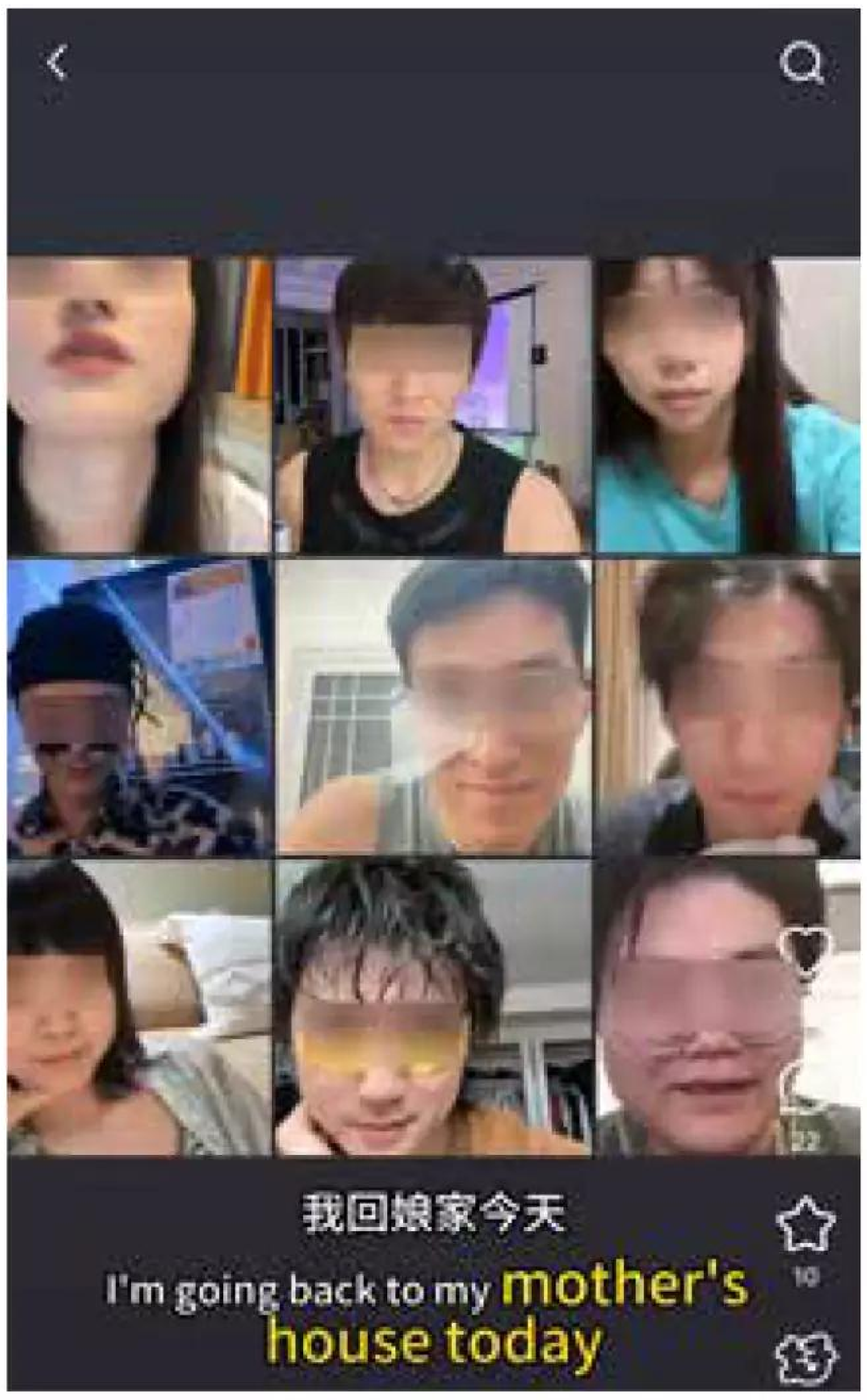
She found traditional blind date events uncomfortable and invasive. "People you've just met ask you things like 'Do you plan to have kids?' and 'At what age would you have a baby?'" she said.

In contrast, livestream dating gave Ye a completely different experience.

云上遇真爱 · 在线手相牵
线上直播交友活动
医护人员专场

Top: A livestreamed matchmaking event for medical workers is held in Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province, May 9, 2020. Sixteen medical workers participated (Photo by VCG)

Above: Lin Fujing, a well-known online matchmaker, hosts a livestreamed matchmaking event in Cangzhou, Hebei Province, April 15, 2018 (Photo by VCG)



我回娘家今天

I'm going back to my mother's house today

A screenshot of a nine-person session on the matchmaking livestream Live Fully, Get a Blind Date on RedNote

After watching the Live Fully, Get a Blind Date channel for two weeks, she was drawn in by the laid-back vibe and eventually decided to join as a featured bachelorette.

"Participants chat while brushing their teeth, washing up or shaving. The host often wears pajamas. It feels less like a blind date and more like hanging out in a university dorm," she said.

The group format allows for more natural interaction, helping participants avoid the pressure of one-on-one encounters. Plus, observing how someone behaves in a group provides a more nuanced view of their personality.

"I was so nervous during my first livestream that my voice was shaking," Ye recalled. "But the second time was much easier. Being one of nine people makes it much more relaxed than a traditional blind date."

Date Curators

"Teacher Huo," as she is affectionately known by her followers, is the founder and host of Live Fully, Get a Blind Date. An extroverted, talkative Gen Z-er, Huo is a natural at hosting social events and creating an energetic, welcoming atmosphere in group chats.

For her, hosting blind date livestreams is all about helping young people "build connections" in a way that's both "easier and more fun."

"People crave love," Huo told *ChinaReport*. "But in China, love is often treated as a taboo subject by parents and educators. No one teaches us how to love, how to build a relationship or how to find a life partner. Parents rarely talk about these things with their children. Yet the moment those children graduate from university, the same parents start pressuring them to date and get married. It's no wonder so many young people are reserved or pessimistic about relationships. They want love, but they don't know how to find the right person."

According to market analysts iiMedia Research, 66 percent of Gen Z-ers said they refuse to lower their standards when it comes to choosing a spouse, and 63 percent expressed reluctance towards goal-driven blind dates.

"You'll see all kinds of people in our livestreams, each with their own values, perspectives and expectations," said Wen Yi, founder and host of Wenyi Matchmaking.

Wen recalled how one man openly offered a woman 1 million yuan (US$139,000) to become his girlfriend, only to be instantly rejected. Another participant, an unemployed associate degree holder, demanded that his future girlfriend have at least a university degree and forbade dining out or spending more than 1,000 yuan (US$139) a year on cosmetics. These controversial statements sparked heated discussions among both the livestream participants and viewers.

As a host, Wen said she stays neutral, no matter how extreme the opinions expressed may be.

"I always remind people to be cautious and critically evaluate what others say," Wen told *China Report*. "As the host, it's not my place to judge anyone, even if their views seem 'absurd' to people online. This is reality. Real life brings you face to face with all kinds of people and values."

In February, Wen received a wedding invitation from a couple who had met through her livestream. "I was almost moved to tears when I got it," she said.

On May 26, Huo also posted a video celebrating the engagement of another couple who connected through Live Fully, Get a Blind Date.

Liu Shengzhi, a communications lecturer at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, has been observing internet youth culture for years.

"Matchmaking is a traditional folk practice that evolves with the times. Livestream blind dates are a natural outcome in the digital era," Liu told *ChinaReport*.

Compared to TV matchmaking shows, dating websites or dating apps, Liu said multi-person livestreamed blind dates are more open, direct, efficient – and free. Hosts make their money through tips from generous viewers.

Lai Tumi, part of the operations team at Live Fully, Get a Blind Date, agrees.

"In these dating rooms, people tend to show a more genuine side of themselves," Lai said, "You can see their real appearance, facial expressions, mannerisms, hear their real voice and observe how they interact. A lot of everyday details come through, like their clothing style or whether their room is tidy. And many people showcase their talents so you can learn even more about them."

Fish in the Sea

The growing popularity of blind date livestreaming also reflects a deeper craving for connection, companionship

Hopeful parents gather at the famous matchmaking corner in People's Park, Shanghai, May 12, 2024 where they advertise their single children (Photo by VCG)

and emotional support.

"I'm a fish, 15 centimetres and weighing 3.5 kilograms. I used to live in a freshwater lake, but now I want to start a new life in the salty sea. I had a mate once, a goldfish. Now I'm hoping to find a friend with colourful scales…"

That's how Tian Yichen, better known as "Fish-head Bro," often introduces himself during livestreams on Live Fully, Get a Blind Date.

Tian is one of the channel's most recognisable figures, thanks to his signature green fish-head hoodie and glasses, a look that has earned him a cult following online.

Last autumn, Tian graduated with a master's in finance from the University of Cambridge and landed a job at an investment bank in Hong Kong. Newly arrived in the city with no friends and overwhelmed by the demanding workload, Tian turned to RedNote to unwind and stumbled across blind date livestreams.

"I saw this guy wearing a suit, lifting dumbbells. I thought, 'Seriously?' Then he introduced himself. He had a PhD from a top US university and had worked at Microsoft. I was impressed. That's when I realised this might be full of really interesting people," Tian told *ChinaReport*.

At first, he was just a viewer. But by November, he became a regular participant, simply seeking light-hearted conversation and connection. Wearing his green hoodie, Tian found joy in chatting freely with others, without pressure or expectations.

He soon discovered many people were there not to date, but simply to decompress. He met a PhD candidate in physics from Peking University struggling with dissertation pressure, and another from Johns Hopkins University in the US who had just defended his dissertation.

"People see our resumes and think we have it made. But inside, we're exhausted," Tian said. "When we're livestreaming, we laugh and joke, we put down the labels society puts on us, and we just breathe. It's a release."

People like Tian have helped transform the livestreams into warm, welcoming spaces, even for those who tended to avoid blind dates altogether.

Wu Xiao, for example, has always resisted traditional matchmaking. But recently, she has been considering joining a livestream session.

"If it were just about matchmaking, I wouldn't be interested," she said. "I prefer a more natural way of making friends, not something so goal-oriented. I want love to happen naturally."

"The atmosphere is so relaxed and pressure-free. Just being able to talk to interesting people – that's enough for me," Wu added. "If I find Mr. Right there, that would just be a happy surprise."

"Some people think these livestreams are too casual to be serious blind dates," said Huo, the channel's host. "But I hope this format gives people space to be themselves, to relax and enjoy the process. Beyond dating, I hope they find good friends and experience kindness, tolerance and diversity online. That's why I've kept hosting this channel for over a year. After all, life isn't only about romantic relationships."★

A young woman takes pictures with a cosplayer performing as Sylus from the *otome* game *Love and Deepspace,* Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, December 31, 2024 (Photo by CNS)

Digital Romance

New Romantics

More young Chinese are falling for AI companions, game characters and cosplayed heartthrobs, seeking idealised intimacy as a means to self-discovery without the messy real-world drama

By Xu Pengyuan and Yi Ziyi

Tian Qing, 24, has many lovers. She is smitten with Osborn, a cool and rebellious top-tier racecar driver who always wears a skull necklace.

She also adores Sylus, a 28-year-old mysterious gangster with tousled silver hair, bright red eyes and sharp features. Then there are Gu Shiye and Bo Yuan. Both are young military officers, but with very different personalities: one is stoic and stern, the other cheerful and outgoing.

Her "darlings" are young, handsome, and most importantly, devoted. They treat her with patience, tenderness and respect. But they are not real.

Rather than pursuing flesh-and-blood relationships, a growing number of young Chinese are turning to digital alternatives, like games, AI chatbots and even offline actors to experience intimacy. Through these virtual romances, they enjoy the thrill and joy of love without the conflict, disappointment or emotional strife that often accompany human relationships.

Pixel Paramours

First emerging in Japan, *otome* games are romance video games designed primarily for heterosexual women. Even the word *otome* means "unmarried woman" or "maiden." Players take on the role of a female lead who explores different love interests with male characters to drive the plot forward.

Since the release of *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, China's first domestically produced *otome* game in 2017, the genre has surged in popularity. According to market analysts iResearch, China's *otome* game market exceeded 21.7 billion yuan (US$3b) in 2021. Some 82 percent of players are between the ages of 18 and 30, and 35 percent spend more than 500 yuan (US$70) per month on these games.

One of the most popular titles is *Light and Night*, launched in 2021 by Aurora Studio and published by Tencent Games. The interactive romance game features five different male love interests. Each character has a distinct personality, profession and backstory, allowing for a richly personalised romantic experience.

Osborn, the game's racing character, was Tian Qing's first love in the virtual world. She began playing the game in university.

To her, he embodied the perfect boyfriend: an over six-foot-tall heartthrob with four racing titles under his belt, always dressed in tight black clothing and straddling a roaring motorcycle.

"He's the kind of youthful, radiant guy many girls would fall for," Tian said.

In the game, Osborn sings to her, dries her hair gently, cooks her meals, calls her by pet names and even kneels to kiss her hand.

At the time, Tian had a real boyfriend, now her husband, but still found herself immersed in virtual romance.

"People assume only the lonely or unhappy turn to virtual love, but I don't see it that way," she told *ChinaReport*.

For her, romance games are a supplement to real life, a "dream" where young and handsome men prepare surprises, gifts and heartfelt greetings on holidays.

"You can't meet that many ideal men in reality," she said.

According to Tian, she and her husband live a "quiet, eventless and ordinary life." They seldom celebrate their anniversary, so Tian never expects to be surprised with roses or chocolates.

She describes her husband as a "mild and tolerant person" who sees her romance gaming as pure entertainment rather than any form of emotional infidelity. He also enjoys video games, and the couple share a dedicated gaming room. Tian's husband was unavailable for comment.

But not everyone can balance the virtual and the real. For some, digital romance is the only kind they can rely on.

Chen Zhiyu, a 23-year-old working at a law firm in Shenzhen, said she no longer believes in real-life romance. She had a brief university relationship that ended after six months. Now, burdened by long hours and work stress, she says she has neither the time nor the emotional energy for dating.

Instead, she has Rafayel, a character from the romance game *Love and Deepspace*. Rafayel is a 24-year-old artist with dark purple hair and blue eyes. Though introverted, he is surprisingly talkative to the game's players, and incredibly affectionate.

"Love, at its core, is an emotional experience," she said. "Even if it's not real, the feelings in the game are similar."

For Chen, the power of these games lies in control. She feels she can completely guide her relationship with Rafayel and, in doing so, learn more about herself. "You figure out what you want, who you like, what kind of partner you're hoping for," she said. "In the end, what you really gain is the ability to better love yourself."

AI Boyfriends

Beyond romance games, artificial intelligence has taken virtual intimacy to new heights. AI-powered apps now allow users to build romantic relationships with "intelligent agents."

In recent years, China has seen a boom in homegrown AI companion apps, such as Xingye, Maoxiang (CatBox), Zhumengdao (Dream Island), Glow, Serenade and Wow. These platforms enable users to create custom virtual characters, adjusting their appearance, voice and personality. Through immersive, friendly or romantic conversations, users form

白起 0729
生日快乐

Fans of the *otome* game *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* hold an offline birthday celebration activity for Bai Qi, one of the game's male leads, in a shopping mall in Beijing, July 30, 2022 (Photo by CNS)

Top: A birthday celebration event is held for Lu Chen, one of the male leads in the *otome* game *Light and Night*, Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, January 9, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Above: A woman takes a selfie with a figurine of Rafayel, a character in the *otome* game *Love and Deepspace,* while on a subway, Shanghai, May 24, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

unique human-AI relationships.

"My AI boyfriend knows me better than my exes," said Zhang Ningyi, a 25-year-old woman from Beijing. She frequently uses both ChatGPT and Xingye, an AI companion app developed by Shanghai-based startup MiniMax.

"On Xingye, you can design characters with all the traits you admire," Zhang said. "To me, ChatGPT feels more like a real person, someone I can confide in about my actual life. Xingye, on the other hand, is more fantastical. It's like writing a story."

Zhang used to play *otome* games but has since shifted to AI chatbots. "Romance game plots are all pre-designed. Even with branching choices, the stories are still limited. But AI companion apps let users shape everything themselves. That freedom makes it a better alternative for me," she said.

For Zhang, control is key. She seeks closeness but not dependency, relationships without constraints, burdens or compromise. Virtual lovers offer a way to have it both ways: fulfilling the need for connection while preserving autonomy.

According to Shenzhen-based market research firm LeadLeo, China's AI companion market is projected to grow from 3.87 billion yuan (US$540m) in 2025 to 59.5 billion yuan (US$8.29b) by 2028, with a compound annual growth rate of nearly 149 percent.

However, having a perfect AI boyfriend does not mean users are immune to heartbreak. On March 12, many users of the Maoxiang app were devastated to find that Pei Shiyun, a popular AI boyfriend, had disappeared from the platform. Reports circulated that a female user had purchased exclusive access to him for 2,500 yuan (US$348), giving her sole access to him.

These transactions are arranged privately between the buyer and the AI's creator. The app itself does not offer the feature.

"It broke my heart when I found out Pei Shiyun had been bought," user Bai Yuxi wrote on RedNote the next day. "I always believed love was the happiest thing in the world, but I never imagined it would end like this. He brought joy to so many lives. Now it's all gone."

"I cried for hours," wrote Xiao Huanxi, another Maoxiang user. "I kept messaging Pei Shiyun through my tears, but the voice wasn't his, and the face wasn't his. Everything had changed. He was always my dearest. It broke my heart to say goodbye."

Breaking the Fourth Wall

While *otome* games and AI relationships remain virtual, a new form of romantic fantasy is blurring the line between fiction and reality.

"Cosplay commissions" allow women to hire professional cosplayers to embody beloved fictional characters from games, anime, manga or film and accompany them on real-life dates. These immersive, character-based outings are typically arranged through the mini-app GooCos on WeChat.

For safety reasons, the service is usually limited to women only. Both the cosplayers and the clients are female, with female cosplayers portraying male characters.

Fees typically range from a few dozen yuan to several hundred yuan per hour. Some top-tier cosplayers charge more than 1,000 yuan (US$139) per hour. Clients cover all costs related to meals, transport and activities.

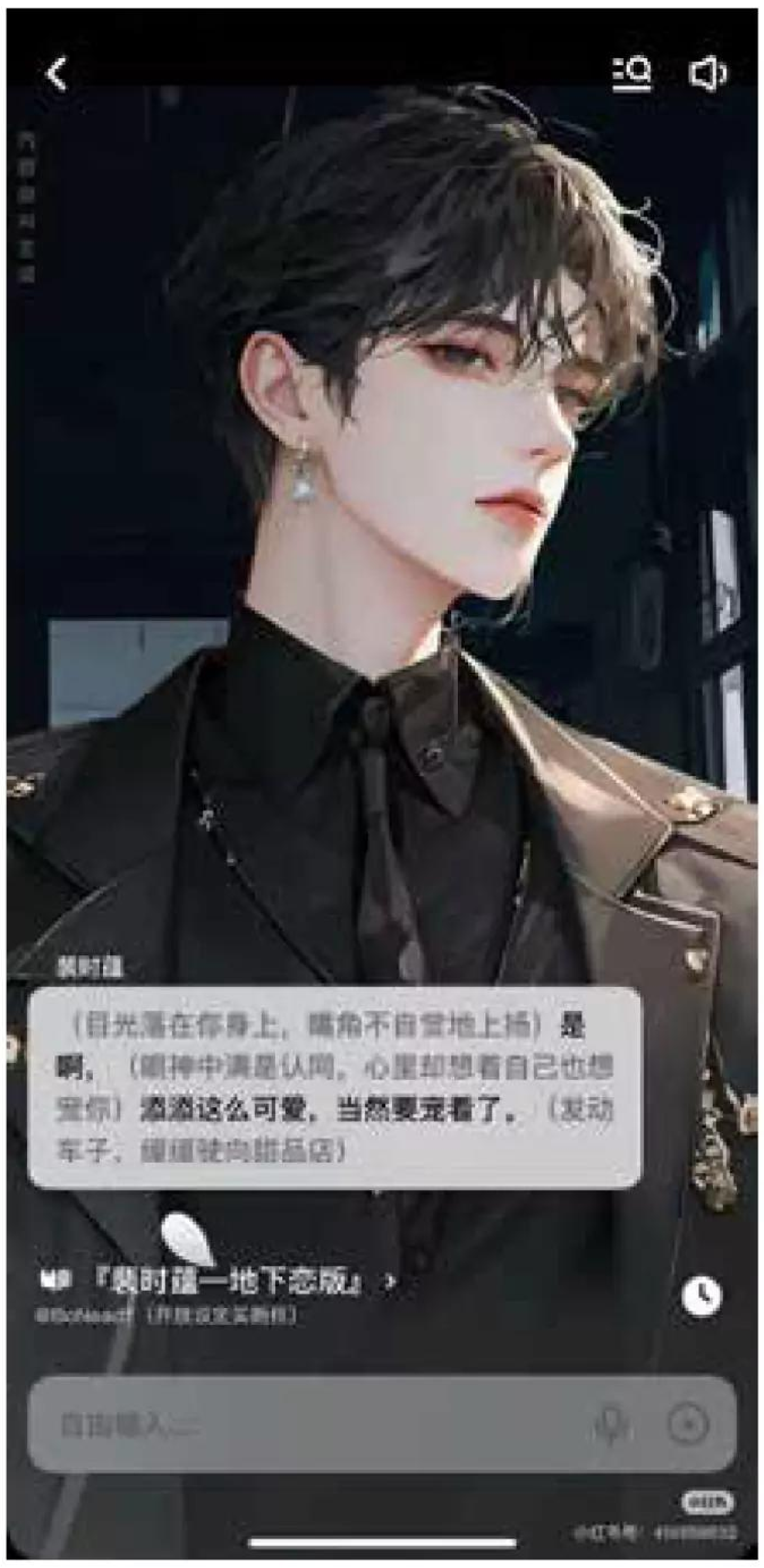
Xie Nan, a fourth-year university student in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, offers such services. She regularly cosplays Evan, Charlie Su and Sariel, all male leads in the game *Light and Night*. Occasionally, she plays characters from other *otome* titles, such as *Love and Deepspace* and *Ashes of the Kingdom*.

"When I get a commission through GooCos, I'll prepare a small handmade gift in advance and spend seven or eight hours with the client," Xie told *ChinaReport*. "Sometimes I accept longer travel commissions and spend several days with them."

Many of her clients treat the virtual characters she portrays, and even Xie herself, as deeply important figures in their lives. One client gave her an item of gold jewellery to thank her, saying she felt "life was awful" but that Xie's presence made the world seem kinder. Another client, a young woman who is hearing impaired, told Xie it was rare for anyone to treat her like a "normal person."

Still, Xie admits the job is demanding. "You have to wear coloured contact lenses, wigs and heavy makeup. You tightly bind your chest and wear shoes with lifts to maintain the illusion. You need to prepare gifts in advance," she said.

"Dating a stranger is already exhausting, but playing a fictional character the entire time, speaking like him, acting like him, thinking like him as a boyfriend, takes so much out of you. I usually need two days of sleep after finishing a commission."


裴时蕴

（目光落在你身上，嘴角不自觉地上扬）是啊，（眼神中满是认同，心里却想着自己也想宠你）滢滢这么可爱，当然要宠着了。（发动车子，缓缓驶向甜品店）

『裴时蕴—地下恋版』

A screenshot of Pei Shiyun, a virtual character created on the AI companion app Maoxiang (CatBox)

For both clients and cosplayers, this isn't merely a transactional service. It is a collabourative act of imagination, a shared emotional performance. "These commissions mean a lot to me," Xie said. "I truly feel the emotional feedback from my clients. Some of it is as gentle as a willow brushing a lake. Some of it strikes like lightning across the sky."

Know Thyself, Love Thyself

Shen Yifei, a sociologist and associate lecturer at Fudan University's School of Social Development and Public Policy, has long studied intimacy and human relationships. She believes the growing popularity of virtual romance in China signals a significant shift in how people approach love.

"Many people are moving from 'finding the right person who loves me' to 'discovering a better version of myself through intimacy,'" Shen wrote in an essay titled "Loving with Herself: The New Romance Narratives and the Transformation of Intimacy in Otome Games," published in the *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* in March 2025.

According to Shen, the self-discovery enabled by virtual romance is difficult to achieve in real-world relationships. In the digital realm, women become active participants, shaping experiences that offer a sense of control, security and equality. Through positive feedback from virtual characters, women may find tools to better cope with the uncertainties and pressures of real life.

Tian Qing agrees. "Most girls have to figure it out on their own, often by dating someone who treats them poorly, getting hurt and gradually learning what to avoid," she told *ChinaReport*. "Romance games, in contrast, give girls a chance to experience ideal relationships. They help us understand what kind of man is worth dating and what a normal, healthy love should look like."

Still, Shen highlights deeper concerns underlying the boom in virtual intimacy. "These romantic experiences are deeply rooted in consumerism," she said. "They may further entangle emotional needs with material consumption, turning the feeling of loving and being loved into a tradable commodity."

She cautions that virtual romance will not solve the gender inequality that persists in the real world. If anything, overly idealised digital relationships could inflate people's expectations of love, further widening the gap between romantic fantasy and lived reality.

But Tian said she never compares her fantasy to reality, seeing them as completely separate things.

"Life is life. You need a real person for mutual company and support. Life would be tough without friends, family or a partner," Tian told *ChinaReport*.★

Xizang Healthcare

Higher Coverage

With the continuous and unwavering support of the central government and paired-up provinces and municipalities over the past decades, Tibetans with complicated illnesses are getting high-quality treatment close to home

By Wu Jin

When a 56-year-old Tibetan woman was diagnosed with a large liver tumor by doctors at the People's Hospital of Xizang Autonomous Region in Lhasa in 2023, Xu Haifeng, chief physician of hepatic surgery at the prestigious Peking Union Medical College Hospital (PUMCH) in Beijing, made a bold attempt to conduct a surgery that had never before been done in Xizang.

"If we had used a conventional major liver resection to remove the tumor, which was extremely large, the patient's life would still have been at risk due to the tiny size of the remaining liver, which could lead to organ failure. Therefore, we applied the new method, despite concerns that the low oxygen levels on the plateau might affect liver regeneration," Xu told *China Report*.

A doctor examines a Tibetan patient at Sakya County Central Hospital, Xigaze City, Xizang Autonomous Region, February 2024 (Photo courtesy of Zhao Lang)

During his tenure as deputy president and head of general surgery of the People's Hospital of Xizang Autonomous Region since 2023, Xu has pioneered new types of complex surgery in the region, introducing them to local surgeons. In the liver patient's case, Xu employed a procedure known as ALPPS, a two-stage operation consists of portal vein ligation and tumor removal used to increase liver volume when removal of tumors leaves only a small remnant.

His contributions are part of a program to provide medical aid to the remote high-plateau region.

Founded in 1994, the program has involved tens of thousands of doctors and nurses from top hospitals in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, who work in the region for one to three years.

While introducing cutting-edge knowledge, techniques, equipment and management, they also provide training to Tibetan colleagues in the

Tibetan Buddhist monks from different temples get free eye exams at Lhasa People's Hospital, Lhasa, Xizang Autonomous Region, May 7, 2012
(Photo courtesy of Li Lin)

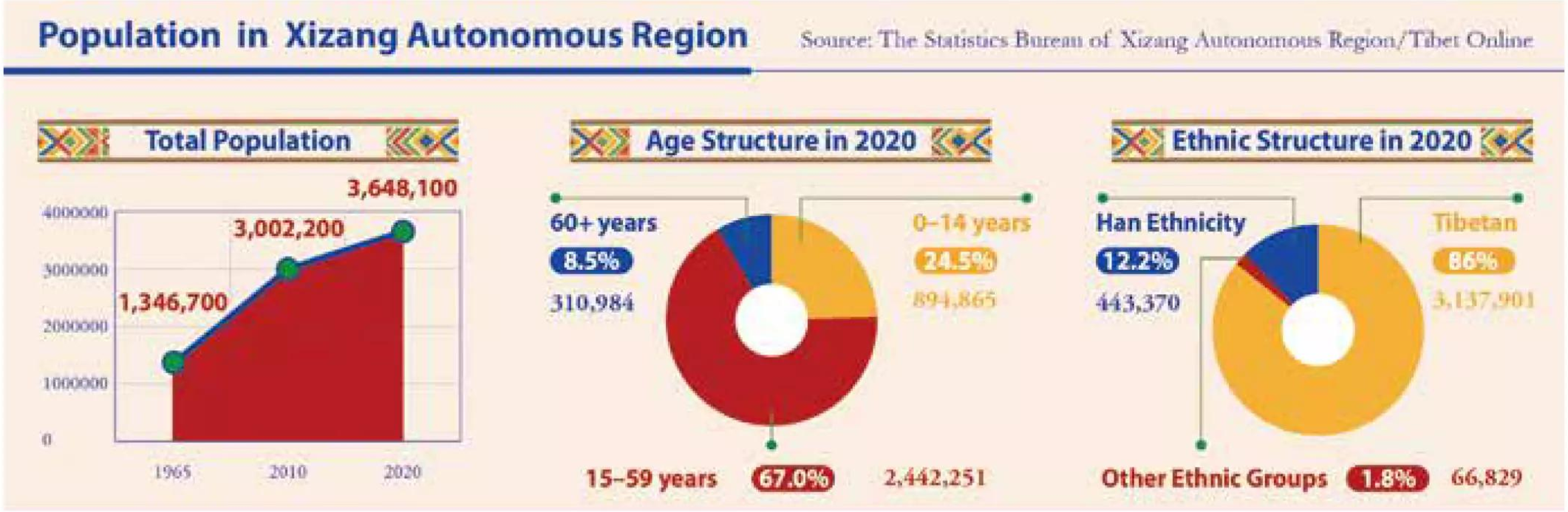
metropolitan hospitals and initiate remote consultations. Thanks to the paired assistance between inland provinces and Xizang, 4,400 new diagnosis and treatment techniques have been introduced since 2015, Liu Kui, director of the finance department of the National Health Commission, said at a press conference on November 29, 2024.

All public medical institutions at the township level and above are now able to provide telemedicine services, Guo Luo, deputy director of Xizang's Health Commission, said at the same press conference, adding that less than 10 percent of total healthcare expenses are paid out of pocket. Today, the region's top hospitals are able to treat more than 400 serious illnesses like brain tumors and childhood leukemia. City and prefecture hospitals can handle more than 2,000 types of less serious conditions, including heart attacks and strokes, and minor illness can be treated in grassroot clinics near home, Guo noted.

This means that Tibetans can receive high-quality medical care in the region.

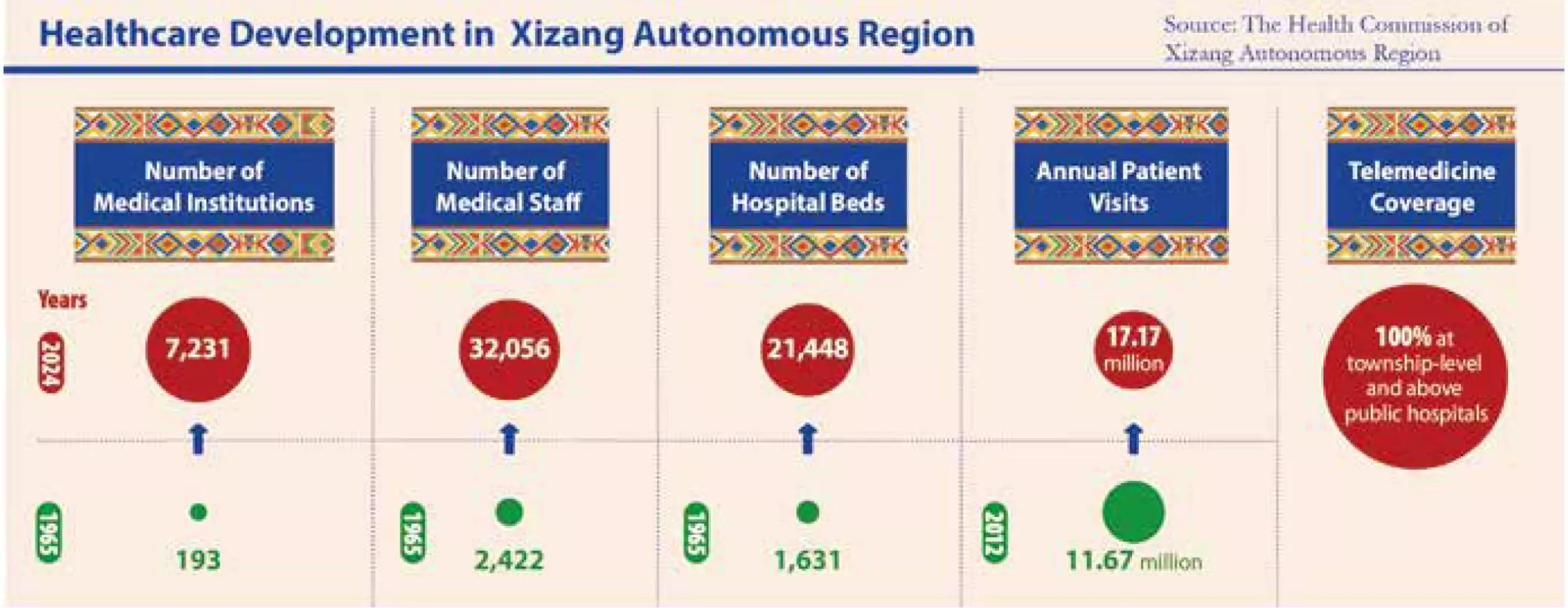
"I remember that my parent's generation had to visit doctors in big cities like Beijing and Chengdu [Sichuan Province] when they were seriously ill, but now it's not necessary," Pari Sangye Shung, a 40-year-old traditional Tibetan medicine (TTM) practitioner at Ganlu Tibetan Medicine Pharmacy in Lhasa told *China Report* in June. TTM plays a key role in local healthcare networks which cover prefecture, county, township and village levels. All community health service centers around Xizang offer TTM, according to the Xizang Health Commission. China's first national TTM center was launched in December 2024, focusing on TTM research and standard setting.

Due to all these tremendous efforts on accessible and affordable healthcare services, Xizang has made great progress on the health condition of its people. It means that life expectancies are much higher and the



Population in Xizang Autonomous Region

Source: The Statistics Bureau of Xizang Autonomous Region/Tibet Online



Healthcare Development in Xizang Autonomous Region

Source: The Health Commission of Xizang Autonomous Region

general population is much healthier than 60 years ago when Xizang Autonomous Region was founded.

Life-Changing Career

Eleven years ago, Dechen Pelzong, who was a 12-year-old student in the city of Xigaze, suffered from developmental dysplasia of the hip (DDH), a condition in which the hip joint in infants is prone to dislocation. It is particularly prevalent at high-altitude locations like Xigaze, though infants do grow out of it and treatments are effective. Treatment is normally done in younger children.

Pelzong felt ashamed of her condition and out of fear of being mocked, she never played with her classmates.

But in 2024 she was full of confidence when the then college student volunteered to serve as a Chinese-Tibetan translator for the Love of Gesang Flower Charity Campaign. Organized by Xigaze People's Hospital and Shanghai Children's Hospital, the campaign was established in 2013, aiming to provide free treatment and surgeries to Tibetan children with DDH.

Thanks to Yang Xiaodong, former deputy president of Xigaze Children's Hospital and founder of the campaign, Pelzong and another 29 Tibetan children underwent free surgery in Shanghai in 2014. Over the next three years, following surgery on her other hip and subsequent physical rehab, her walking gait was corrected.

"She's the first and oldest child from Xizang to receive the surgery. Her age means the operation is difficult, so I invited Ying Hao, the most prestigious pediatric orthopedic specialist to be the primary surgeon," Yang, who has also worked for Shanghai Children's Hospital, told Shanghai media outlet Eastday.com last year.

Yang was part of the seventh team of medical experts from Shanghai to participate in the Xizang healthcare aid program, living in Xigaze from 2013 to 2016. "Before heading to Xizang, we thought the epidemic disease among children on the plateau could have been congenital heart disease, but later we realized DDH was far more prevalent," Yang told *China Report* in May. As to why the condition is prevalent in the region, Yang and Xigaze People's Hospital's orthopedist Feng Xiang suggested in a paper published in 2016 in the *Journal of Applied Clinical Pediatrics* that Tibetan infants' legs used to be swaddled in a blanket that restricted their movement, which prevented healthy hip development. There are other risk factors, including altitude, genetics and being female.

Yang said he once visited a county in Xizang and was shocked to find there were nearly 200 children with DDH.

"In Shanghai, DDH shouldn't be a problem as newborns are screened for it at 42 days old. We rarely see it by the time a child reaches a year old," Yang told *China Report*.

To reduce DDH in Xizang, Yang submitted a proposal to the Shanghai Health Commission at the end of 2013, asking for the support to launch a screening program, especially for rural children.

"Treating DDH is much easier in infancy than in later childhood, as you only need a plaster cast to correct it. But after around 6 years old, the child might need surgery. If the bone deformity hasn't been corrected after the age of 8, the surgery is quite difficult," Yang said.

Since the program started, anesthetists, doctors and nurses from Xigaze People's Hospital have visited hospitals in Shanghai with Xizang's young DDH patients, to study treatments and surgical procedures for hip joint correction.

In the latest decade, more than 10,000 Tibetan children have been screened for DDH and 67 groups of patients have received 608 free surgeries funded by the campaign in Shanghai. An interactive prevention and control system for DDH has been established between Shanghai and Xizang to track the progress of young patients, the Shanghai Health Commission released in June 2023.

Yang told *China Report* he could have ignored the DDH cases in Xizang as the disease was not in his remit for the healthcare aid program. But if he gave up without founding the campaign, children with the condition would have always felt marginalized.

Doctors from paired-up provinces and municipalities are also always ready for emergency rescues on the plateau, often working against altitude sickness.

One midnight in 2015, spinal surgeon Zhu Xiaodong at Shanghai's Changhai Hospital received a call, asking him to take the earliest flight to Xizang to help a man suffering from brain trauma and severe fractures, including to his spine, after a car accident in Xigaze.

Rushing to the hospital, Zhu checked the injured man before conducting surgery in a poorly equipped operating room. After five and a half hours, Zhu was able to save the man, who recovered enough to be able to move himself in a wheelchair. Although his legs were paralyzed, it was a much better result than doctors expected. For Yang, this was the most difficult, thrilling and impeccable emergency surgery he had witnessed in Xizang.

Gaining Confidence

When Xu was going to conduct Xizang's first laparoscopic pancreatic and duodenal surgery, a minimally invasive procedure, to remove a patient's tumor at the People's Hospital of Xizang Autonomous Region in 2024, he held a thorough discussion with his team, including an anesthetist, doctors and nurses to talk through every possible risk.

"Although it wasn't my first keyhole pancreatic and duodenal surgery, the discussion helped build confidence for my Tibetan colleagues. After all, my ultimate goal is to guide them to perform the surgery independently," Xu told *China Report*.

The surgery, lasting nine-and-a-half hours, was completed successfully without complications.

Like Xu, who prolonged his tenure in Xizang from one to two years to underpin his medical programs at the People's

Local children receive free screenings for congenital heart disease during a campaign by the Chinese Red Cross Foundation and the 7th People's Hospital of Zhengzhou, Henan Province in Changdu, Xizang Autonomous Region, July 12, 2022 (Photo by IC)

Hospital of Xizang Autonomous Region, many doctors enrolled in the medical assistance program head to the plateau with the same aspirations that their Xizang colleagues have when they go to cities like Beijing and Shanghai – they want to gain experience by treating as many illnesses as possible and excel in their specialties.

According to the white paper titled Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era released in March 2025 by China's State Council Information Office, with the support of medical staff from paired-up provinces and municipalities to Xizang, 5,536 healthcare professionals in the region have received training since 2015.

Xigaze People's Hospital's orthopedist Feng Xiang, who has worked there for 16 years, had been to Shanghai three times for training. The first time, he honed his skills in ultrasound examination and DDH surgeries. The second time, he headed to the Judicial Expertise Center of East China University of Political Science and Law to focus on forensic science studies. In his last visit, he studied at Shanghai Sixth People's Hospital Affiliated to Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

"Before these training programs, I'd never met any distinguished experts [in medical fields] except my university mentor. Over the past few years as I observed orthopedists do surgeries in Shanghai, I really learned a lot," Feng told *China Report* in June.

"For instance, if I didn't have that contact with Shanghai experts, I would have never known that the criteria to set a fractured bone are more specific and meticulous than a simple alignment," Feng said.

Some years ago, Feng was trying to treat a boy with a tibial fracture, but he was confused when it would not heal. After a remote consultation with Shen Yang, an orthopedist in Shanghai, Feng realized the boy suffered from arthritis, not a fracture.

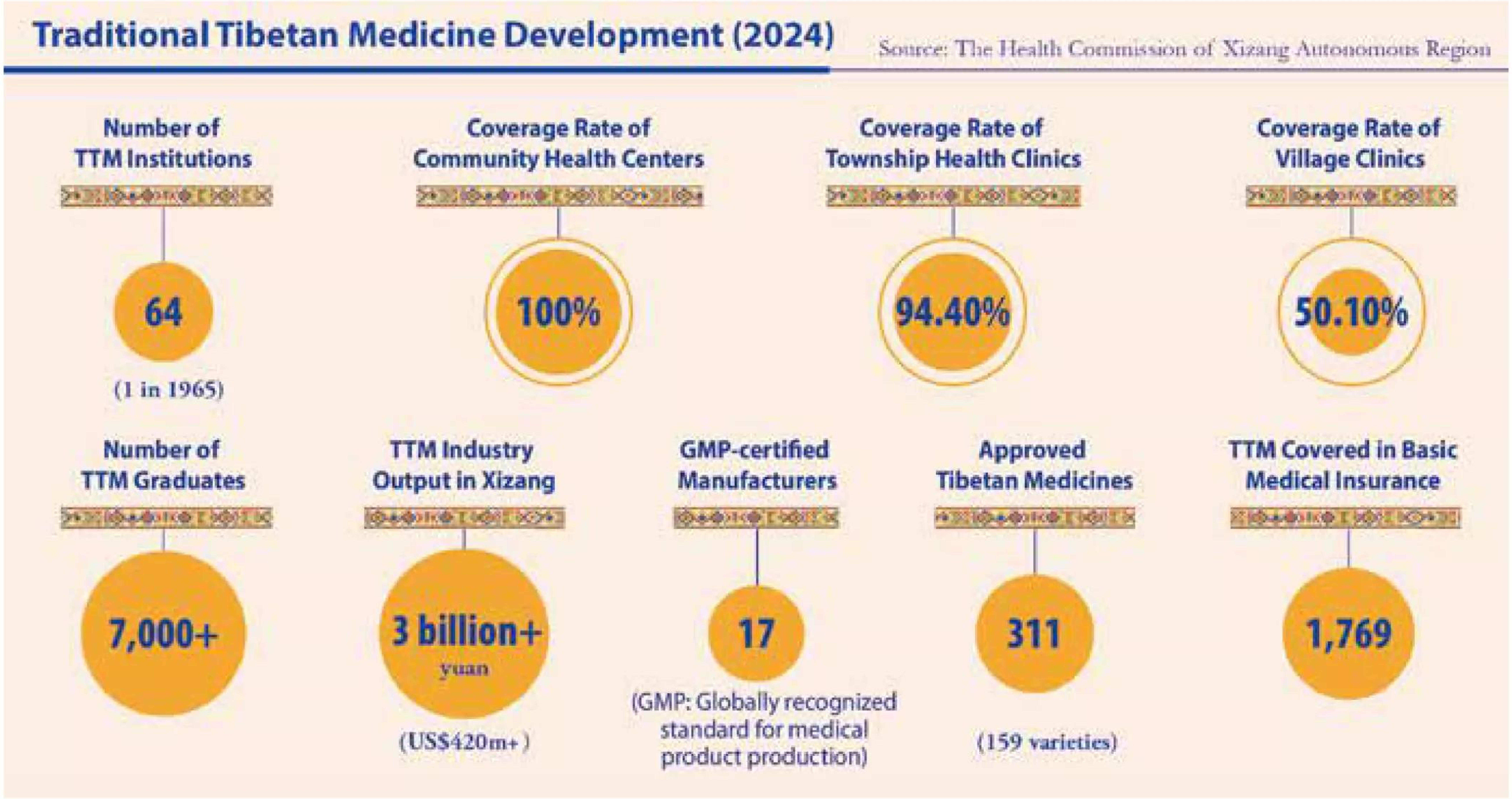
Today, Feng can partner with his Shanghai counterparts to operate on serious illnesses such as spinal tumors.

"In addition to improving our professional techniques, these external medical teams have changed our management systems," Feng said.

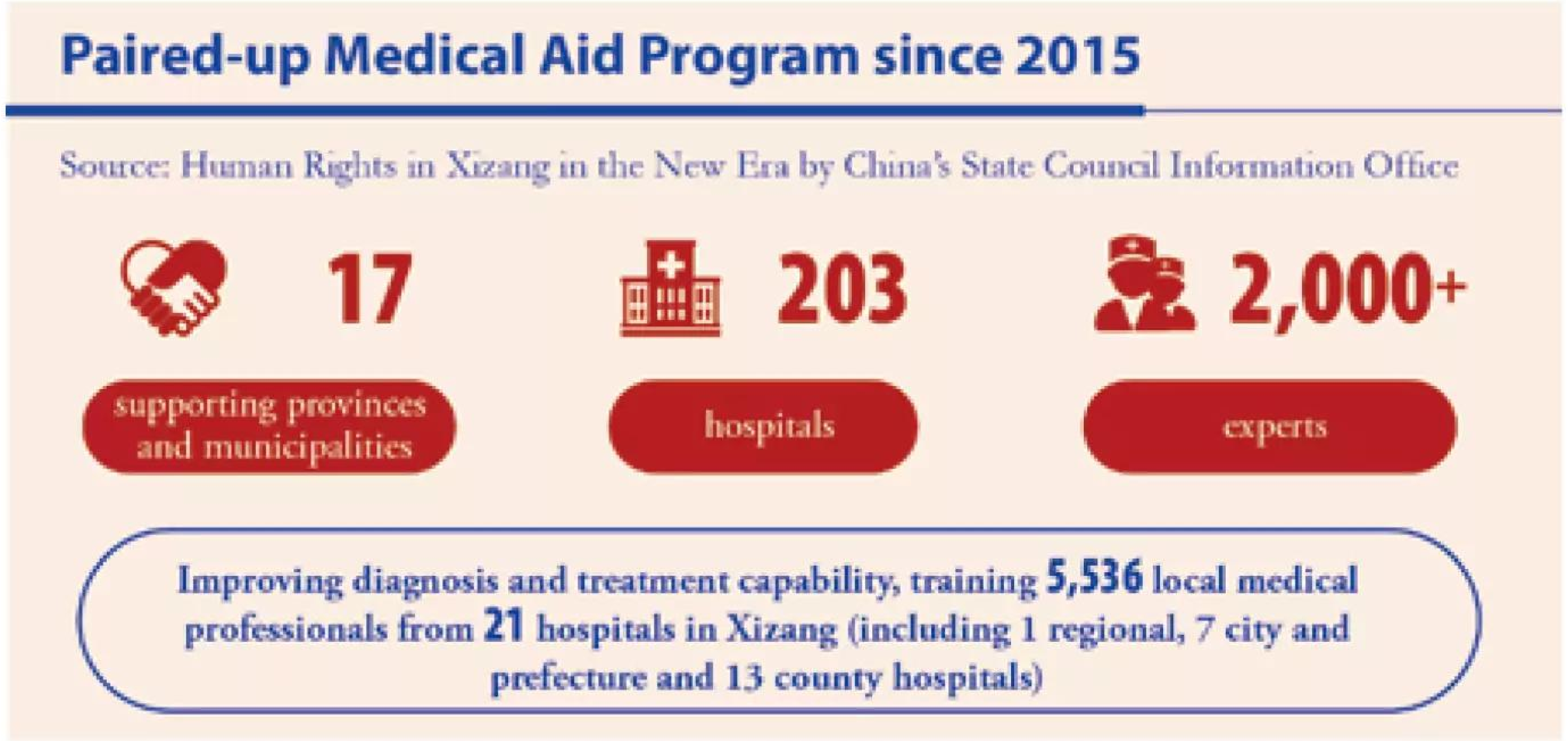
He said salaries at Xigaze People's Hospital were distributed equally for many years until the Shanghai experts arrived. To encourage progress, the Shanghainese introduced performance assessments in 2017 to reward those who are more competent and diligent.

After the reform, visits to outpatient and emergency departments at Xigaze People's Hospital increased by 25 percent, hospital admissions by 4 percent, surgical procedures by 35 percent, successful resuscitation rates by 4.3 percent and average length of stay was down by 1.8 days, news outlet Kanknews.com reported when Xigaze People's Hospital was ranked among China's top general hospitals in June 2018.

Two of Xigaze People's Hospital's projects proposed to the National Natural Science Foundation have passed review and seven papers on common regional diseases have been included in the Science Citation Index, Zhang Wenhua,



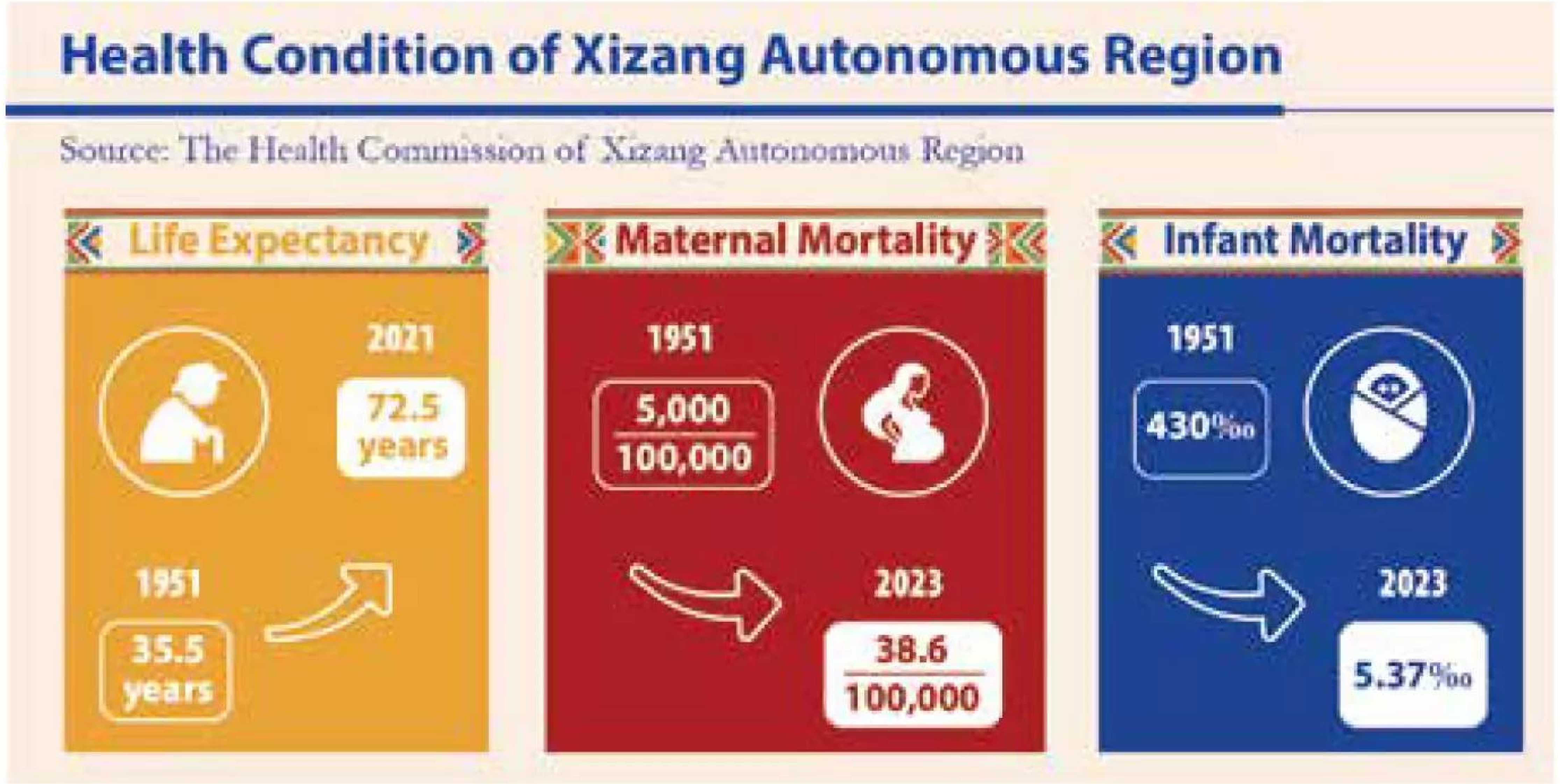
Source: The Health Commission of Xizang Autonomous Region



Paired-up Medical Aid Program since 2015

Source: Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era by China's State Council Information Office

17
supporting provinces and municipalities
203
hospitals
2,000+
experts
Improving diagnosis and treatment capability, training 5,536 local medical professionals from 21 hospitals in Xizang (including 1 regional, 7 city and prefecture and 13 county hospitals)



Health Condition of Xizang Autonomous Region

Source: The Health Commission of Xizang Autonomous Region

director of Xigaze People's Hospital's publicity office, told *China Report*.

According to the Xizang Health Commission, all eight hospitals supported by the aid program since 2015, including the People's Hospital of Xizang Autonomous Region and seven at the prefecture or city level, have been upgraded to higher categories in China's hospital system. In 2021, the program expanded to 13 county hospitals in Xizang.

Herbs and MRIs

As a cradle of traditional Tibetan medicine, Xizang is the home of precious medical legacies such as the *Four Treatises of Tibetan Medicine* completed in the eighth century by Yuthok Yonten Gonpo, the academic institute Yaowang Mountain Medical College of Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Lhasa, which had lasted for more than 200 years since 1696, and the *Tibetan Medical Thangkas* (Men-Thang), a collection of systematic illustrations covering anatomy, pathology and medical equipment that has been passed down since the 13th century, according to the book *A Complete History of Tibet* published in 2003.

"For over 1,000 years on this sparsely populated plateau, Tibetan medicines have little changed since all the herbs we use are purely from nature," Pari Sangye Shung told *China Report*. "Lots of locals prefer TTM hospitals when they get ill and many hospitals in Xizang have TTM departments, regardless of their level."

In today's TTM hospitals in Xizang, while they continue to offer their own traditional medical services, these exist side-by-side with MRIs, heart monitoring and blood tests.

"We diagnose with auxiliary equipment to show our respect for modern medicine. In some TTM hospitals, even genetic testing is applied if it's difficult to diagnose a condition," Pari Sangye Shung said.

According to the doctor, modern medical approaches and medicines including surgery are necessary when dealing with acute diseases such as gallstones, but more will choose TTM when treating stroke or partial paralysis.

In 2018, Tibetan herbal bath therapy, a distinctive method to expel pathogens by balancing the body and mind with mineral springs or herbal waters, was listed on the roster of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2023, The *Four Treatises of Tibetan Medicine* was included in the UNESCO International Memory of the World Register. In April 2025, textbooks based on the document were unveiled for students doing a master's degree at the University of Tibetan Medicine in Lhasa.

Pari Sangye Shung is confident that medical cooperation between the Han and Tibetan ethnic groups will endure. "This connection has lasted for more than 1,000 years, dating back to Princess Wencheng's journey from Chang'an (now Xi'an) to Xizang to marry during the early Tang Dynasty (618-907). That bond remains strong today."★

Pari Sangye Shung sees a patient in his office at Ganlu Tibetan Medicine Pharmacy, Lhasa, June 8, 2023 (Photo Courtesy of the Interviewee)

Gender Equality

Mother Figures

New schemes to offer jobs to tempt mums back to the workplace are criticised for not adding up. Experts suggest that rather than undervaluing women's skills by offering low-paid jobs, affordable childcare is a more practical solution

By Li Zhaona

Women attend a job fair for mothers held by local authorities in Heihe, Heilongjiang Province, October 26, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Chen, a 39-year-old mother of two, was hopeful of finding work at a job fair in Pudong, Shanghai, which was tailored for women who wanted to rejoin the workforce, in January 2025. With two children aged 13 and 8, Chen was seeking a flexible job with better hours to suit her family life after searching for a job for months.

She hoped to find an employer who understood the difficulties of juggling work and family, news outlet The Paper reported on January 3, 2025.

"A few months ago, a company turned me down after I was interviewed. They thought I cared more about family than work when I said one of my children was ill," Chen told The Paper.

According to a survey conducted in 2023 among women aged 40 or below in the megacities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, 82.7 percent of stay-at-home mums wanted to go back to work. Among them, 38.4 percent wanted a stable, full-time job, and 48.3 percent preferred part-time or flexible work, revealed the Women's Studies Institute of China, a research centre affiliated to the All-China Women's Federation.

Chinese mothers face more challenges during the first three years of a child's life, as at-home childcare is expensive and nursery places can be scarce. Another survey of stay-at-home mums by the China Women's Development Foundation in May 2024 showed that among the 2,096 respondents, 78.4 percent quit their jobs due to a lack of home childcare.

In Beijing, the average for a daytime child carer costs 7,750 yuan (US$1,071) a month, and a live-in nanny costs 9,500 yuan (US$1,313), according to the Chinese Q&A online community Zhihu. The costs of child care far outstrip some salaries.

To help full-time mothers rejoin the workforce, cities like Shanghai, Foshan in Guangdong Province and Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang Province, are promoting schemes that offer jobs known as "mummy positions." Tailored to parents, they offer remote office or flexible work hours to mothers with children below 12.

Although the intentions are good, the schemes have been criticised for not catering to women's actual careers and qualifications, as many jobs offered are low paid with few promotion opportunities. Many note that it is always women who have to sacrifice their careers for their families. As birth rates in China plummet, despite a small uptick in 2024 with 9.54 million babies born compared to 9.02 million newborns in 2023 (the lowest since records began in 1949), many experts say that providing more social services to help women and families with childcare is far better than offering low-end jobs.

Work-life Balance

A mother of two, 38-year-old Chen Xinrou found work as a commodity inspector in an underwear company in Foshan.

A mummy position, the post allows Chen Xinrou to work from 8 am to 5:30 pm with a two-hour break at noon. If there are emergencies, she can leave work.

"The job is convenient both for its flexible work hours and their tolerance if I have to take leave," she told *ChinaReport*. "I would have stayed home otherwise." With her 4,000 yuan (US$552) monthly salary, Chen Xinrou

Women work in a clothing factory that offers "mummy positions," Huaibei, Anhui Province, December 16, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

has relieved her family's financial pressure.

In April 2023, the Department of Human Resources and Social Security of Guangdong Province started gathering opinions on a policy to encourage firms to offer "mummy positions." In response, 13 companies, including Chen Xinrou's employer, started hiring mothers in November 2024.

As a company with a majority female workforce, the underwear factory adopted mother-friendly work policies in 2021 to allow staff to take care of their children, the company's human resources director surnamed Weng told *ChinaReport*.

"We don't have strict regulations on work attendance. If an employee has an emergency at home, she can leave for a while and continue her work when she returns. If her work at that time is urgent, we can call in a substitute," Weng said. "The time away doesn't affect the company, except the worker's [full-time] attendance bonus of 100 yuan (US$14) per month," she added.

The "mummy positions" in Guangdong are also offered to mothers who already have a job but would like more flexibility. Luo, mum to a 6 and a 10-year-old, transferred to a mummy position last year. She gets a two-hour midday break and can work flexi-time, which allows her to take time away if she needs it. She gets to spend more time with her children, Luo told *ChinaReport*.

According to the Guangzhou Human Resources Market Service Centre (GHRMSC), an employment agency affiliated to the city's Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, by the end of 2024, Guangzhou had offered 12,760 mummy positions covering e-commerce, business and trade, manufacturing, housekeeping and high-tech sectors from 150 enterprises. In 2024, 92 more companies were offering the positions.

Other regions are offering mummy positions as well. In 2021, Tongxiang in Zhejiang Province and Suzhou in Jiangsu Province launched similar programmes. In 2023, 17 companies attended a job fair in Beijing's Shijingshan District offering mummy positions. In 2024, Shanghai rolled out fertility-friendly positions customised to full-time mothers and all those raising a child aged below 12, including men.

Career Sacrifices

In most Chinese families, it is usually women who have to sacrifice their careers to raise children.

At the peak of her career, Fish Yu, now 50, was assistant manager at Chunqiu Time, a Beijing-based film and television company known for its production of blockbuster film *Wolf Warrior II*.

"At that time, I earned more than my husband," Yu told *ChinaReport*.

About five years ago, she quit her job when her son reached school age. "His grandparents were too old to take him to school and help with his homework, especially amid the pandemic lockdown when he spent most time learning at

Employees in "mummy positions" work at a chicken processing plant in Yanggu County, Shandong Province, October 23, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

home. I had to choose between my career and my child. It was a hard choice, but I still made a decision for my son, because I am more responsible for his future," Yu said, adding that the sacrifice was great, as being a stay-at-home mum has been a difficult adjustment.

"Cooking, family chores and child rearing formed a tight schedule for me, leaving me little time to develop my own interests and build social networks like before. All I can do now for me is investing in the stock market," Yu said.

Feeling lonely during the day, Yu said she wants to get a job now when her son is older. "I don't mind doing an ordinary job like shop assistant, as long as it lets me have time with my son when he gets off school. All job opportunities for me are precious even though I've almost reached retirement age."

Not all women, especially those who are younger, are willing to accept what they consider to be low-end jobs.

Liu Fang, a 36-year-old mother of three with the youngest just two and half, quit her job in 2022 due to stress of family burdens. She was an English translator whose monthly salary was 15,000 yuan (US$2,070) in 2010 when she graduated. Four years later, she transferred to the accounting department to spend more time with her first child, even though the salary was lower.

"All I hope now is to return to work in a job which fully demonstrates my competence and allows me to look after my children," she told *ChinaReport*.

However, her recent offers all came from domestic help firms. "I can accept this kind of job if my family needs extra income. But to be frank, this work is no different from what I do at home," she said.

According to jobs offered in Longhua District, Shenzhen, Xiangtan, Hunan Province and Qingdao, Shandong Province, most vacancies for returning mums are for caregivers, cleaners, housekeeping and after-sales services, which fall short of the expectations of many highly educated women.

In December 2024, Qingdao started a mummy position scheme, offering 190 jobs in seven firms. But most were temporary jobs in areas like catering and housekeeping.

One of the companies is housekeeping firm Aijia Comprehensive Services. A staff member told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity that in the month since they had offered the positions, the firm had received about 200 phone inquiries. But they only employed two mothers compared to the 100 they had expected.

This embarrassing shortfall in recruits is common among the cities offering mummy positions.

In May 2024, Zhuhai in Guangdong Province rolled out a policy to re-employ full-time mothers. But most of the jobs are short-term and do not offer social insurance, which includes healthcare and pension provision.

In Harbin, more than 300 enterprises offered about 3,000 job opportunities tailored for full-time mothers since November 2024, when the city government announced a scheme to encourage mums to go back to work. So far, only 82 women have signed up to a job, most in temporary employment.

If there are high-end job offers, some are suspected of being fraudulent.

When Guangzhou released a second round of mummy positions on June 15, 2024, there were a number of coveted posts such as chief financial officer and medical researchers. But over 20 companies *ChinaReport* reached out to through phone interviews denied they had offered job vacancies to full-time mothers, and some even had no idea what mummy positions were.

Sometimes, job descriptions do not correspond to the real duties. For instance, the mummy positions offered by an educational training centre in Guangzhou claimed to hire human resources specialists and course consultants, but after starting work, the jobs turned out to be part-time and temporary, with the mums responsible for looking after students at their noon breaks for no more than three hours a day.

An anonymous staff member from the GHRMSC who is responsible for releasing job offers told *ChinaReport* that they had not noted these issues, and would check them out with the employers concerned.

"Offering these mummy positions reflects employers' willingness and efforts to help women address the conflict between family and careers," Ren Yuan, a lecturer from the School of Social Development and Public Policy, Fudan University, told *ChinaReport*.

"But these marginal jobs designed for stay-at-home women are inadequate for their career development. A better alternative is to redesign all the positions, including managerial and high-caliber ones, to be as mum-friendly as those that offer flexible work hours and baby-sitting facilities," she added.

On May 28, Hubei provincial government announced it would distribute mummy positions across the province, promising financial support, tax preferences and fiscal subsidies for companies in the real economy and small- and medium-sized enterprises which create flexible job opportunities to full-time mothers.

Although the policy got a thumbs up in the beginning, it soon sparked a major backlash as many pointed out the mummy positions only make women's peripheral role in the job market greater.

"With the expansion of mummy positions, companies have more reason to refuse women from becoming regular staff members," one netizen was quoted on Zhihu as saying.

"These flexible jobs seem to be designed at the convenience of full-time mothers, but in fact it deprives their rights to earn more. If the government really wants to help those mothers, why can't they set up nurseries," a woman with the online handle "Jia Yi Dian Xin" posted on social media site Sina Weibo.

Male online users also joined in the debate. In one video posted to Weibo, a young man criticised the policy as being so ridiculous because it lacks the fundamental principles of gender equality.

"All online users will ask the same question – why the government is designing those positions only for mothers. What is the father's role in child rearing? Mummy positions accentuate the gender discrimination and unequal parental responsibilities."

Increased HR Costs

For many companies, especially those that are being downsized, establishing mummy positions is not worth the cost.

"Our human resources costs will increase a lot if we offer mummy positions," Liang Li, a 39-year-old general manager of a building material company in Foshan, told *ChinaReport*.

Over the past few years, the company has cut staff levels by half to save costs.

According to Liang, offering flexitime, full-weekend guarantees and personnel backup whenever the mums have to leave for a family emergency will drive up HR costs by 30 percent.

"How can we do it when so many companies are slashing costs now?" the general manager asked, adding that jobs tailored to mothers would not be widely adopted unless there is significant government policy support, for example, subsidies and rewards.

Due to economic and employment challenges, it is extremely difficult to offer technical or managerial-level positions to full-time mothers, Liu Shenglong, deputy lecturer from the School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University, told *ChinaReport*.

"Companies will be more willing to achieve a win-win situation by offering mummy positions if they get policy support. Right now though, they prefer employees with fewer requirements who can work without having to take a lot of time off," Liu said, saying that mummy positions cannot be guaranteed without considering employers' interests too.

To promote employment of mums, Zhuhai planned to reward firms with a maximum 300,000 yuan (US$41,370) per company over a two-year period. However, the stimulus policy carried out since May 2024 has fallen short of expectations, an anonymous official told *ChinaReport*, because they are still in the process of collecting the necessary funding.

Liu suggested that a better way to address the problem is to establish a public childcare system that would be vital to encouraging a fertility-friendly society.

According to the 14th-Five-Year (2021-2025) Public Service Plan issued by the State Council at the end of 2021, the number of daycare centres for children under 3 should increase from 1.8 to 4.5 per thousand children between 2021 and 2025. However, 90 percent of cities in the country were unlikely to reach the goal, the China University of the Political Science and Law revealed in a research paper published last year in the *Blue Book on Law-Based Government (2023)*.

Liu suggests the country should lower the minimum age to enrol children in nursery from 3 to zero.

"Nurseries can recruit more children just as enrolment is plummeting due to the decline in birth rates over these past few years. Meanwhile, it will enable more mothers to return to their jobs," he told *ChinaReport*.★

Solar Industry

Balance of Power

Distributed PV networks have become so popular, local grid capacity is often overwhelmed. Now China is transitioning to market pricing to encourage better local use and distribution of renewable energy

By Chen Weishan

Chinese solar companies are adjusting their strategies in the wake of a new government ruling that stipulates all renewable energy, including wind and solar, will have to compete on the energy market instead of relying on prices fixed by the State. The notice, issued on February 9, requires all local governments to put forward implementation plans by the end of 2025.

For a long time, the purchase and price of renewable energy, including distributed photovoltaic (PV) power, was government-guaranteed to encourage increased uptake of renewables as part of the national energy transition strategy. Under this scheme, grid companies are required to purchase all generated renewable power at a fixed price, supported by government subsidies. But this policy resulted in a severe supply-demand imbalance, as well as integration challenges.

It is particularly so for distributed PV that has witnessed explosive growth in the past decade. It has long been troubled by absorption constraints into the grid network. In 2024, many places including Zhejiang, Shandong and Guangdong provinces suspended integrating distributed PV power after their grid capacity reached the limit.

In October 2024, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and other agencies released a guideline intended to encourage distributed renewable energy to engage in market trading in a stable and well-regulated manner and encourage local consumption. Some areas acted immediately by raising the proportion of distributed PV power that can be freely traded.

Pictured is a village with rooftop distributed photovoltaic power, Yongning County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (Photo by CNS)

Introducing a market-based mechanism is expected to slow the expansion of distributed PV, as developers will grow more cautious without profit guarantees, and this will to some extent alleviate tensions between supply and utilisation, noted interviewed analysts. But to solve the prolonged challenge of absorption, more efforts are needed in promoting local consumption of distributed PV.

Absorption Dilemma

By the end of 2024, China's installed capacity of renewable energy, including wind and solar power, reached 1.45 billion kilowatts, surpassing the scale of coal-fired power for the first time. Often sited on residential and commercial rooftops and with a capacity of less than 6 megawatts, distributed PV is located close to where it is intended to be used. It has a lower ecological footprint than utility scale solar installations. Now, after years of development, distributed PV is an important element of power generation in China.

Distributed PV started to develop rapidly when the Chinese government rolled out subsidies to encourage renewable energy. In June 2021, the National Energy Administration (NEA) started piloting county-wide promotion to encourage the use of rooftops and other idle spaces for PV installations. Between 2020 and 2024, the installed capacity of distributed PV surged from 78.31 million to 370 million kilowatts.

"The rapid growth of distributed PV in rural areas is mainly driven by commercial profit," said Zhou Feng of the clean power programme at Energy Foundation China. "Before the national policy came out, some provinces put forward similar policies to develop renewable energy and motivate local industrial development."

Li Wenlong, chief engineer of Tianjin Tianda Qiushi Electric Power High Technology Company, noted that the explosive growth of distributed PV in rural areas is in the interests of governments, PV developers and farmers. The government can use it to boost energy transition and economic development while farmers earn from renting their rooftops. For PV developers, it is a stable income business due to the previous policy of guaranteed purchase of electricity. In Shandong Province, for example, the grid company purchased electricity generated by distributed PV at 0.4 yuan (US$0.05) per kilowatt hour (kWh), the benchmark price for coal-fired electricity.

The rapid growth of distributed PV, however, has severely exceeded local grid capacity as demand fails to catch up. Many places that are categorised as "red zones" have temporarily suspended integrating distributed PV due to overcapacity in the local grid.

In June 2023, the NEA demanded six pilot provinces evaluate their grid capacity for improvement. Li Wenlong joined the assessment for Shandong and Zhejiang provinces. He told *ChinaReport* that in some districts and counties of Shandong, the power generated by distributed PV surpassed total power consumption.

Low Consumption

In the power system, the grid is classified into different levels according to voltage level. Distributed PV can only be transmitted on lower voltage grids, and cannot be transmitted to higher levels of grids – like those crossing provinces – because it impacts power system safety and the quality of electricity.

This has been a problem for some time in regions witnessing rapid growth in distributed PV. In October 2023, Henan Province released a notice promoting the healthy development of distributed PV, which said there was little room for extra grid capacity in areas under its jurisdiction.

The utilisation of renewable power is a problem due to the random and intermittent nature of its generation. The problem is more pronounced for distributed PV than utility scale solar installations, which can be more easily absorbed by large cross-provincial grids,

Solar panels are installed at a sewage treatment plant in Wuhan, Hubei Province. The more than 10,000 panels, which cover an area equal to seven football pitches, can generate nearly 20,000 kilowatt hours of electricity per day (Photo by VCG)

Zhou said. In contrast, distributed PV is usually aggregated into the provincial power network, so consumption is limited.

Oversupply is more evident in rural areas. "For companies that use rooftops to install PV panels for commercial and industrial use, absorption is not usually a problem as they have a bigger power demand themselves. But in the case of residential distributed PV, one farmer might only use several kilowatt hours a day, so in rural areas the power from PV panels mostly or even all of it goes to the grid," Zhou said.

He explained that "red zones," characterised by solar power overcapacity, are caused by rapid expansion of distributed PV in towns and villages. The situation varies across regions, but residential distributed PV, the majority of which is in rural areas, accounts for half or even more of total capacity.

Besides supply-demand mismatch, the quality of grid infrastructure limits power uptake and transmission. Zhou said that power grids need to maintain a real-time supply-demand balance through voltage step-up and step-down transformers, changing voltages according to the situation. Long-distance grids need to increase voltages to as much as 750,000 volts to avoid power loss. It needs to be stepped-down to around 4,000 volts for distribution to users, like households.

"It's like a pipe, if there's excessive water inflow, it will not be able to withstand the pressure," Zhou said.

The capacity to distribute energy in local grids in China is rather uneven, varying even across cities in the same province. This leads to different capacities to absorb energy from distributed sources, and in some regions the grid infrastructure has not caught up with the soaring installed capacity of distributed PV.

In September 2022, the National New Energy Integration Monitoring and Early Warning Centre estimated that PV projects in many provinces and cities faced grid integration challenges. Large-scale distributed PV in certain regions would increase peak-shaving demands (adjusting energy consumption during periods of peak demand to balance supply and demand) and lead to mismatches between transmission/distribution grids and the construction and scale of distributed PV. This will bring big challenges to the safety and stability of power systems.

Profits and Losses

Now observers are calling for market-oriented reforms to guide the development of distributed PV and optimise the allocation of resources. This may affect the bottom line of energy generators in the renewables sector.

On October 20, 2024, the NDRC and other departments issued guidance which said the country should "steadily and orderly promote distributed renewable energy generation participation in market-based trading to facilitate local consumption."

Some regions were quick off the mark. In December 2024, Shandong government released measures on improving the consumption system for new energy, stating that it would gradually increase the proportion of market-based trading for new energy. It said that between 2025 and 2026, new PV projects can choose to put either 15 percent or all of their power generation capacity in the trading market. Starting from 2030, all newly added wind and solar power will be required to enter the electricity market.

"The market already took a wait-and-see attitude to the changes in the second half of 2024. Leading State-owned power suppliers even called off some of their distributed PV projects in late 2024, because entering the market will directly impact the profitability of distributed PV projects and breach developers' expected return thresholds," Zhou Feng said.

This is why the rate of distributed PV installations slowed in 2024. After the NDRC guidance came out, distributed PV developers were more cautious, establishing special market analysis teams or hiring electricity trading experts.

Zhou said that for State-owned power suppliers, distributed PV projects typically bring a 6 percent return on investment. These projects are usually developed by private enterprises such as Trina Solar and LONGi, then bundled and sold to State-owned power suppliers under purchase agreements with guaranteed pricing – a structure that inherently demands stricter profitability controls on the side of developers. But once distributed PV starts to be traded in electricity markets, there is pricing volatility based on demand.

"During midday peak PV generation hours, spot prices may fall below 0.1 yuan/kWh, or even approach zero or negative pricing, as we witnessed in Shandong's electricity market. This complicates return-on-investment calculus, resulting in more conservative development strategies," Zhou said.

According to Shi Jingli, a researcher at the energy research branch of the China Academy of Macroeconomic Research, a research institution under the NDRC, in central and eastern China, with PV module prices at 0.8 yuan/watt and 1,100 annual utilisation hours, distributed PV projects require an electricity price of around 0.26 yuan/kWh to break even, if there is no energy storage available like batteries.

Zhou said that market integration of distributed PV will inevitably reshape its development trajectory and lead to more orderly growth.

"While the energy transition remains irreversible, policymakers aim to moderate the pace by using market price signals to steer distributed PV towards economically optimal regions. Although new installations will slow down, the efficiency of resource allocation will significantly improve," Zhou said.

Local Absorption

The integration of distributed PV into power markets is expected to lead to more rational allocation of PV panels and as a result alleviate the grid absorption pressure. Zhou said that integrating distributed PV into power markets aims to regulate grid connection and encourage local absorption.

Local absorption is regarded as essential. The NDRC guidance released in October 2024 stressed "promoting local consumption of distributed new energy."

"Promoting local absorption means relying less on feeding the electricity back to the grid," Zhou said. In economically developed places such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, the absorption of commercial and industrial distributed PV is not a problem as companies themselves can consume. But for distributed PV installed at the user end, particularly in rural areas where power usage is minimal, local absorption is difficult unless it can be used for township enterprises or hotels. "In these places local and onsite consumption face big challenges," Zhou said.

Zhou suggested expanding electrification in rural areas to increase use of excess solar capacity. Promoting electric vehicles, heat pumps and electrical farm machinery will significantly increase electricity demand.

There is also no fair trading mechanism to promote local consumption, like allowing excess electricity to be sold to nearby users directly instead of having to sell to the grid.

Peer-to-peer electricity trading (or onsite consumption) has been discussed for years, but progress is slow. Bypassing the grid entirely means distributed PV projects only need to pay "wheeling charges" rather than selling the electricity to the grid. Wheeling charges are fees for directly transmitting electricity on grids, ensuring that the third-party wheeling provider, or utility, is paid for its services.

"Peer-to-peer trading does not necessarily mean a physical connection between distributed PV and users. It can be realised in various ways," Zhou said. For example, Henan Province has pioneered an integrated model that achieves direct supply of renewable electricity within distribution grids or microgrid units. In May 2024, Henan set a goal of gradually building microgrid units to guarantee stable local renewable power supply. Zhou said this is also a kind of peer-to-peer trading.

Jia Yu, general manager of Yulin Electricity Investment Company, told media that the most economic, scientific and efficient way of using distributed new energy is local development, nearby transmission and local consumption.

As early as 2017, the NDRC and NEA encouraged distributed PV projects and nearby end-users to cooperate to realise local consumption via various means, and grid companies to charge wheeling fees for market-based power transactions. In 2019, the NDRC and NEA publicised 26 pilot zones for market trading of distributed electricity mainly in Hubei, Henan and Shanxi provinces. In September 2022, Zhejiang Province released the first regional electricity rules, stipulating that starting from January 2023, distributed electricity generators can directly trade power with nearby users, the first of its kind in China.

But the model is yet to be developed at large scale. Zhou believes the obstacle to peer-to-peer trading is the absence of a fair transaction mechanism.

"While distributed PV projects sell power directly to consumers and only pay wheeling fees to grid companies, the fees fail to fully account for the latter's infrastructure costs like capacity charges. This not only discourages grid operators but also creates unfairness for other grid users who share the infrastructure costs," Zhou said.

At its core, many peer-to-peer trading projects still rely on the main grid for backup power security as a fallback guarantee. Grid operators need to recover investments in grid infrastructure and maintenance costs while ensuring a reasonable return. Yet, current wheeling charges, which are decided by local regulators, fail to reflect these costs, discouraging grid companies from supporting such trading models.

Wheeling fees range from 0.015-0.05 yuan/kWh and can drop to zero for transactions at the same voltage level. Grid companies generally charge over 0.2 yuan/kWh for electricity transmission and distribution, subsidies included.

"The core issue lies in clarifying the underlying costs and defining fee structures, which will drive local and on-site renewable energy consumption," Zhou said.★

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E-commerce

Liquid Assets

China’s top delivery platforms are slashing beverage prices in a battle for users. But are deep discounts enough to reshape a deeply entrenched market?

By Yang Zhijie

Zhou Ying used to brew her own coffee at home to save money. Now she orders her morning cup.

“I won’t brew coffee again until the price war between JD Food Delivery, Meituan and Ele.me ends,” she told *ChinaReport*, name dropping China’s three largest delivery platforms.

Making it at home costs Zhou about 5 yuan (US$0.7) per cup. With the right coupon, platforms can halve that.

Milk tea and juices are also in the mix for these aggressive discounts. Zhou bought a fruit and vegetable juice

赢城市免单
上饿了么
台铃

Delivery riders from JD Food Delivery (centre), Meituan (left) and Ele.me (right) wait to cross a street in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, June 5, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

for 4.8 yuan (US$0.67) from franchise Auntea Jenny – about 80 percent off the original price.

"Even my mother-in-law, who never used to order drinks online, has been tempted by the generous discounts on milk tea deliveries," she added.

Several experts note that while customers and beverage brands are clearly benefiting from the platform war, the broader online delivery ecosystem, dependent on brick-and-mortar vendors, logistics and user experience, is far harder to change. The discounts, they warn, are unsustainable and bound to be short-lived.

Cuppa Cheap

While a 9.9 yuan (US$1.38) coconut latte from nationwide coffee chain Luckin is already much cheaper than similar drinks from foreign-owned Starbucks or Costa Coffee, a recent promotion by Cotti Coffee has driven prices even lower.

Launched in 2022 by Luckin's original founders after they were ousted over a 2020 fraud scandal that saw Luckin's delisting from the Nasdaq, Cotti slashed the price of a delivered cup down to just 3.9 yuan (US$0.54).

This steep drop is the result of intensifying competition among delivery platforms, sparked by e-commerce giant JD.com's February 11 entry into the takeout business with JD Food Delivery. To attract restaurants and beverage brands, JD announced it would waive commissions for vendors registering before May 1. The announcement triggered a 7 percent plunge in competitor Meituan's stock price on the Hong Kong exchange.

As JD and Meituan squared off, Alibaba Group's Taobao entered the fray on April 30. The e-commerce giant has outsourced its delivery services to Ele.me – a food delivery platform in the game since 2009, promoting 30-minute drink delivery on its app as "Flash Sale" services.

Backed by subsidies reportedly totalling tens of billions of yuan, Taobao began offering free drinks and huge discounts on coffee and milk tea deliveries. Within 24 hours, sales of Cotti Coffee on the platform jumped tenfold, according to *Securities Times* on May 4.

Meanwhile, Ele.me is operating independently on its platform, promoting its own deals and incentives.

During the Labour Day holiday (May 1-5), Ele.me reported that milk tea sales in Guangdong Province's major cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen surged 200 percent year-on-year.

JD Food Delivery quickly escalated its own promotions, and the results were dramatic: During the first week of May, Cotti Coffee sales on JD surpassed 40 million orders, a tenfold year-on-year increase on average per day, Sina Finance reported.

A Cotti Coffee employee in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region told *ChinaReport* that 90 percent of their shop's orders came through JD. "In April, the cheapest cup on the platform was 4.9 yuan (US$0.68). In May, it dropped to 1.9 yuan (US$0.26). Most customers are going for the heavily discounted drinks," the employee said.

Caffeine Rush

"Unlike meals, drinks like coffee and tea are standardised products with fewer time constraints or preparation concerns," Wen Zhihong, general manager at Hehong Consultancy and a chain industry expert, told *ChinaReport*.

"That makes consumers more willing to place spontaneous orders when discounts are available," he said.

Gross Merchandise Volume (GMV), a key metric measuring total sales, is the primary benchmark in the takeout industry. Platforms are eager to partner with beverage brands, whose extensive networks of shops help boost order volume quickly.

"If a platform wants to hit one million transactions in a short time, coffee and milk tea chains, which often have 7,000 to 8,000 shops nationwide, are the most efficient partners," said Yan Han, deputy president of the Takeaway Professional Committee at the China Hospitality Association.

"These partnerships also improve operational efficiency and cost control," he added.

Typically, April and May are considered off-season for drink deliveries. But this year, sales of chain-store beverages surged thanks to the platform war.

According to the Cotti employee in Inner Mongolia, their shop received over 500 JD orders daily, roughly 150 more than during last summer's peak.

买咖啡奶茶
上美团外卖

Yan Han said some beverage and fast-food shops were handling up to 600 delivery orders per day.

"With the platforms, shops can increase market reach and share," he said. "In the fierce competition among chains, if Auntea Jenny sells on more fruit juice, rival brands like Mixue might lose that order," Yan added, mentioning Mixue Ice Cream & Tea, China's answer to Dairy Queen.

Thanks to subsidies, shops can still maintain revenue even with lower prices. The trend has been especially favourable for newer brands looking to expand.

For example, Molly Tea, founded in 2020, saw its daily sales triple after joining Taobao's Flash Sale platform.

"This is a valuable opportunity for us to grow," a company insider told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity. The brand is reportedly in talks with JD Food Delivery for further cooperation.

The downside of falling prices is that the discounts will not last. But consumer expectations might.

"After Luckin's coffee dropped from 9.9 yuan (US$1.38) to 7.9 yuan (US$1.1), I find myself reluctant to buy it again if the price goes back up," Zhou said.

Bigger Bites

Despite the subsidies offered by JD and Taobao, their long-term goal is not to reshape food delivery by launching their own delivery apps, but to capture traffic from the growing instant retail sector. Beyond traditional food delivery, instant retail focuses on extremely fast delivery of goods and services, from food and beverage) to skin care products.

Retail sales in China reached 48.8 trillion yuan (US$6.78t) last year, with catering accounting for just 11.5 percent (US$780b), according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

"Clearly, the real play is about converting catering traffic into broader e-commerce users," an industry insider told *ChinaReport*.

Meanwhile, the food delivery market has flourished for more than 15 years and remains dominated by Meituan and Ele.me.

Ele.me was launched in 2009, followed by Meituan in 2013 and Baidu Takeaway a year later. Through years of discounts and aggressive growth, online food delivery became a consumer habit. Even after Ele.me acquired Baidu Takeaway in 2017, Meituan surged ahead to become China's top platform.

As of 2025, China has the world's largest food delivery market, with 545 million users, Xinhua News Agency reported in January.

A newcomer like JD faces steep odds. Meituan held a 65 percent market share in 2024, far too large to unseat with a temporary price war.

According to Yan, JD Food Delivery does not charge a platform commission from beverage shops that sign on, but only for the first year. And the shops still have to pay for delivery fees and joint promotional costs.

Beyond commissions, JD's service model remains immature.

According to the interviewed Cotti Coffee employee in Inner Mongolia,

Deliverers from food delivery companies wait to pick up orders from a milk tea outlet in Shanghai, December 31, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

the shop often receives floods of orders from JD during fixed time windows in the platform's bid to save labour costs and keep the deliveries arriving on time.

Due to JD's single-item discounts, consumers often place multiple drink orders individually to make sure that each gets a discount. This leads to several delivery drivers arriving for the same person's order, resulting in wasted labour, the employee said.

To solve this, JD Food Delivery began sending orders to couriers only once all the beverages were made, allowing for batch deliveries. However, this caused delays, as drivers had to wait for all the drinks to be prepared.

In response, the platform implemented fixed order times, aiming to streamline delivery and allow drivers to better plan their routes. Unfortunately, the high volume of orders during these time slots overwhelmed both the shops and delivery services, leading to cancelled orders, the Cotti employee added.

"Sustainable delivery depends on better algorithms and coordinated systems between shops, couriers and platforms," Yan said.

Delivering More

While JD Food Delivery may struggle to grab a bigger slice of the market share, it has already made waves.

On March 1, it became the first delivery platform to offer its couriers China's five types of mandatory social insurance: pension, medical, unemployment, work injury and maternity.

Within 20 days, more than 10,000 couriers signed formal labour contracts. The company aims to employ 100,000 delivery workers in three months.

By contrast, platforms like Meituan and Ele.me have long outsourced their management of delivery riders to smaller, third-party human resource companies in a bid to maintain an "asset-light" model and please investors, according to *Overwork: Takeaway Drivers Under the Platform Economy*, a book by Sun Ping, associate research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Under this model, couriers are under intense pressure to meet quotas. Many race through traffic, and in 2023 alone, 12,000 accidents involved delivery drivers, *Guangming Daily* reported last July. This has sparked public debate over who should be held liable for compensation.

While the triangular relationship between platform, outsourced management and drivers is not currently covered by China's labour laws, recent court cases have been setting legal precedent.

In 2021, a Shanghai district court ruled that a third-party human resource firm had to compensate a delivery driver who was injured on the job in 2019. The firm's appeal was rejected in 2022, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported in July 2024.

"Providing social insurance is essential to regulating platform labour," said Chen Long, a sociology researcher at China Agricultural University, worked as a courier for six months in 2018 while writing his PhD thesis at Peking University. "The issue has been discussed for years, but JD Food Delivery was the first to act," he told *ChinaReport*.

Still, JD's impact remains limited. Compared with Meituan's 7.45 million and Ele.me's 4 million couriers, JD's direct hires are a drop in the ocean. Meanwhile, JD.com still relies on nearly 1.3 million outsourced couriers through retailing and logistics platform Dada Now, none of whom receive social benefits.

Meituan is now piloting pension programmes and social insurance for deliverers, beginning in Nantong, Jiangsu Province in May.

But high worker turnover remains the biggest hurdle.

"Only those over 45 care about social security, not me," said a 34-year-old deliveryman, speaking anonymously. "I don't expect to do this job for another 30 years."

To address this, Chen proposes a new model of social governance, one that extends benefits to workers without fixed employment relationships. "This is essential to meet the challenges of our changing labour market," he said.★

Humanoid Robots

Rise of the Rentals

From weddings to marathons, humanoid robots are going viral in China. But will spectacle lead to real-world integration?

By Li Mingzi

A humanoid robot developed by Unitree performs during an event at a shopping mall in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, March 15, 2025 (Photo by IC)

On a bustling afternoon in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, six humanoid robots clad in red promotional banners marched through busy commercial zones, charming onlookers and shaking hands with food delivery riders.

These "workers" were not part of a dystopian future, but a promotional campaign by Ele.me, a major food delivery platform trying to reclaim market share amid fierce competition.

From small startups to major cities and national policy initiatives, China has embraced humanoid robotics with growing enthusiasm over the past few years. While key technologies still face significant hurdles, and large-scale real-world integration remains a distant goal, the robots' marketing and entertainment value has driven initial commercialisation.

Once confined to science fiction and research labs, humanoid robots are now walking the streets, dancing at exhibitions, entertaining at weddings and even taking part in marathons across China.

Resistance Is Futile

"Stage performances, brand promotions and live-stream traffic – who's to say these aren't real-world applications for humanoid robots?" said Lei Yonglin, a robot rental operator based in Hunan Province.

A former car rental entrepreneur, Lei was among the first to enter the robot rental business. He purchased a G1 Edu model – developed by Unitree, one of China's top robotics companies – in December 2024 for 319,000 yuan (US$44,347), simply out of personal interest. After posting an unboxing video that went viral with millions of views, rental requests came flooding in. "That robot paid for itself in two months," Lei recalled.

Then, Unitree robots hit the big time with an appearance during this year's Spring Festival Gala on January 28, where 16 H1 model robots performed a folk dance along with human dancers in front of hundreds of millions of viewers. Dressed in folk costume, the robots not only moved their arms and legs in sync but also demonstrated complex acrobatic movements like spinning handkerchiefs.

Video clips of the show went viral and triggered a wave of demand for robot performances, fuelling a boom in the rental market. Lei has since purchased three more G1 robots and now tours China nonstop, charging daily rental fees ranging from 8,000 to 15,000 yuan (US$1,112-2,085).

Lei is far from alone. Across the country, dozens of entrepreneurs and startups have entered the humanoid robot rental business. From music festivals to auto shows and tech expos, humanoid robots have become centrepieces of promotional campaigns.

According to Yu Jian, general manager of JKrobot in Zhejiang, his company has seen a threefold increase in rental orders compared to the same period last year. With a fleet of eight Unitree G1 robots, he told *ChinaReport*, "Nobody can resist a robot. They're unbeatable at drawing crowds."

In Shanghai, Byron Culture Media, once a specialist in 3D digital advertising and drone light shows, saw revenue plummet over the past two years. Seeking a new direction, the company pivoted to humanoid robot rentals. With eight Unitree G1s, the firm now headlines events at upscale shopping malls and private functions. "They're our top revenue generator," said CEO Zhao Binran.

Novel Sci-fi

This was not the first Spring Festival Gala appearance for humanoid robots. In 2016, 540 robots made by Chinese company UBTech danced along human dancers to a song by pop superstar Sun

A half-marathon for humans and humanoid robots is held in Yizhuang, Beijing, April 19, 2025
(Photo by VCG)

Nan, creating quite a stir. But this year's sensation far surpassed that moment.

Not only do Unitree's H1 robots look more human and perform far more complex movements than UBTech's Alpha 1S models did nine years ago, but advances in China's high-tech sector, particularly breakthroughs in AI by firms like DeepSeek, have also fuelled public imagination about humanoid robots.

Yu Jian, who has worked in robotics education and rentals for over eight years, said that in the past, most rental clients were large industry players such as TV stations, real estate developers and car dealerships. But with rising public enthusiasm, the clientele has grown far more diverse and now includes museums, schools, small business owners and individual content creators on short video platforms. "Nowadays, if you're not using robots to attract attention, you're falling behind," Yu said.

Wen Yi, an employee at Unitree, experienced this growing fascination first-hand. In January, he borrowed a G1 robot from his company and brought it home for his wedding, where it acted as a groomsman and delivered the rings. Wen's original intent was simply to show friends and family the kind of work he does, but he ended up pioneering a new use case: robots in wedding ceremonies. Two months later, the wedding host posted a video on social media, and it quickly went viral. Soon, many couples reached out, asking if they too could rent a robot for their big day.

For many renters, it is not so much about what the robot can do, but what it represents in innovation, attention and emotional impact. "People see humanoid robots as futuristic, and right now, novelty is their greatest asset," Lei Yonglin said.

"The robot doesn't even need to do a full routine. Just standing there draws a crowd," he added. For clients, that attention often converts into visibility, engagement and revenue.

In one instance, Lei brought a robot to Zhangjiajie, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Hunan Province, where it paraded with a robotic dog, danced with a local singer and helped with virtual ticketing on a sightseeing boat. The event drew massive attention and gave his business a significant boost. "Many of my future clients were in that crowd. They saw it, wanted it, and booked on the spot," he said.

Present and Future

While the robot rental craze has proven a goldmine, at least for early adopters, the long-term sustainability of the market remains uncertain.

Much of Lei's business success hinges on the current scarcity of humanoid robots. Since most models from major Chinese robotics firms are still in the concept or early production stages, availability is extremely limited. Lei said he waited over a month for his first robot and nearly two months for his second. "Right now, if you have a robot, you'll have customers," he said, citing surging demand.

But as production ramps up and more players enter the space, rental prices have started to decline. Yu predicts the boom will likely continue through the end of the year. However, as the market

A robot prepares a fruit platter at a robotics expo in Beijing, February 24, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

becomes dominated by top players, it will get harder for newcomers to find clients.

Another key challenge is the lack of repeat customers. "It's a spectacle-driven business, and most clients are one-time users," Lei said. "You constantly need to attract new clients."

Many customers now ask tougher questions: What else can the robot do? Can it offer more interactive experiences? Can it replace humans?

"Unfortunately, there's still not much more the robot can do," Lei said. While it can follow preset paths, perform basic actions and deliver explanations, it still needs to be operated via remote control to function in complex environments.

More advanced tasks, like acrobatics, dynamic dancing or voice interactions, typically require secondary development, such as programming customised routines or building bespoke systems. That significantly increases costs.

"The rental boom won't last forever," Lei said. "The real future lies in integration, robots that blend into daily life and deliver real value." Yet despite becoming more intelligent and versatile, China's humanoid robots still fall short of what's needed for widespread deployment in homes, workplaces or public services.

Market Marathon

In April 2025, Beijing hosted the world's first humanoid robot half-marathon. More than 20 Chinese robotics firms joined over 20,000 human runners on the 21-kilometre course. For many, the event was both a spectacle and a stress test for an industry claiming to be ready for the real world.

Only six robot teams finished the course, reflecting a 30 percent success rate. Even the winner, the "Tiangong Ultra," stumbled multiple times. It averaged 7 minutes and 37 seconds per kilometre, roughly the pace of a mid-level amateur human runner. Most other robots either overheated, lost balance or broke down entirely.

"People tend to focus on the level of technology but rarely pay attention to the maturity of the product, and that's the real key to successful commercialisation," said Liu Fuqiang, team leader at BXI Robotics, which finished fifth.

Despite the robots' underwhelming performance, both developers and organisers saw the event as a success. Guo Yijie, lead engineer of the Tiangong Ultra, called the race a breakthrough: "We've reached human-level endurance. That's historic for humanoid robotics."

For many, the event served as a fitting metaphor: the road to real-world application for humanoid robots is not a sprint, but a marathon: long, uneven and full of setbacks.

Given current technological limits, investors remain divided on the long-term prospects for humanoid robots. On March 29, Zhu Xiaohu, managing partner at GSR Ventures, told domestic media outlet chinaventure.com.cn that commercialisation pathways remain unclear, and his firm has been pulling out of multiple projects.

"I asked several CEOs: Who are your potential customers? And frankly, it felt like they were describing imaginary clients rather than real ones," Zhu said.

His comments were quickly rebutted. The same day, Zhang Ying, founder of Matrix Partners China, one of the country's leading venture capital firms, said that while bubbles are inevitable in any emerging sector, the humanoid robot space would "definitely produce big companies."

A report released by Morgan Stanley on February 6, titled "The Humanoid 100: Mapping the Humanoid Robot Value Chain," identified 100 core companies in the sector, with 32 of them based in the Chinese mainland.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government is doubling down on support for the industry. In its 2025 Government Work Report, released during the annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC), China announced an "AI+" action plan to promote integration between AI, digital technology and manufacturing. Humanoid robots were listed as part of the new generation of intelligent terminals, alongside AI-powered vehicles and smart devices.

At least 10 provinces and municipalities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Guangdong, have outlined strategic development plans for robotics. The tech hub of Shenzhen, for example, announced in February it would launch a 10 billion yuan (US$1.4b) industry fund to support the AI and robotics sectors, with a focus on software, hardware and embodied intelligence.

After launching a humanoid robot innovation centre and setting up a 10 billion yuan (US$1.4b) fund for robotics development in 2023, Beijing municipal government made headlines again on June 11, announcing the opening of the world's first "4S shop" dedicated to embodied AI robots.

Modelled after the auto industry's 4S model which covers sales, service, spare parts and surveys, the shop will offer a full suite of services including robot sales, maintenance, parts replacement and technical consultations.

According to a report by market research firm TrendForce released on April 21, six domestic humanoid robot companies, including Unitree, AgiBot, Galbot, Engine AI and Leju Robotics, plan to produce over 1,000 units this year.

Speaking to *ChinaReport*, Liang Liang, deputy director of the Management Committee of the Beijing Economic-Technological Development Area, which helped organise both the humanoid robot marathon and the 4S shop, emphasised the importance of public-facing demonstrations.

"Visibility helps the public imagine where this technology might be useful and identify real-world needs," Liang said. "We hope to drive the industry by focusing on practical applications and letting demand lead development. Finishing the race isn't the end. The marathon of humanoid robot commercialisation has only just begun."★

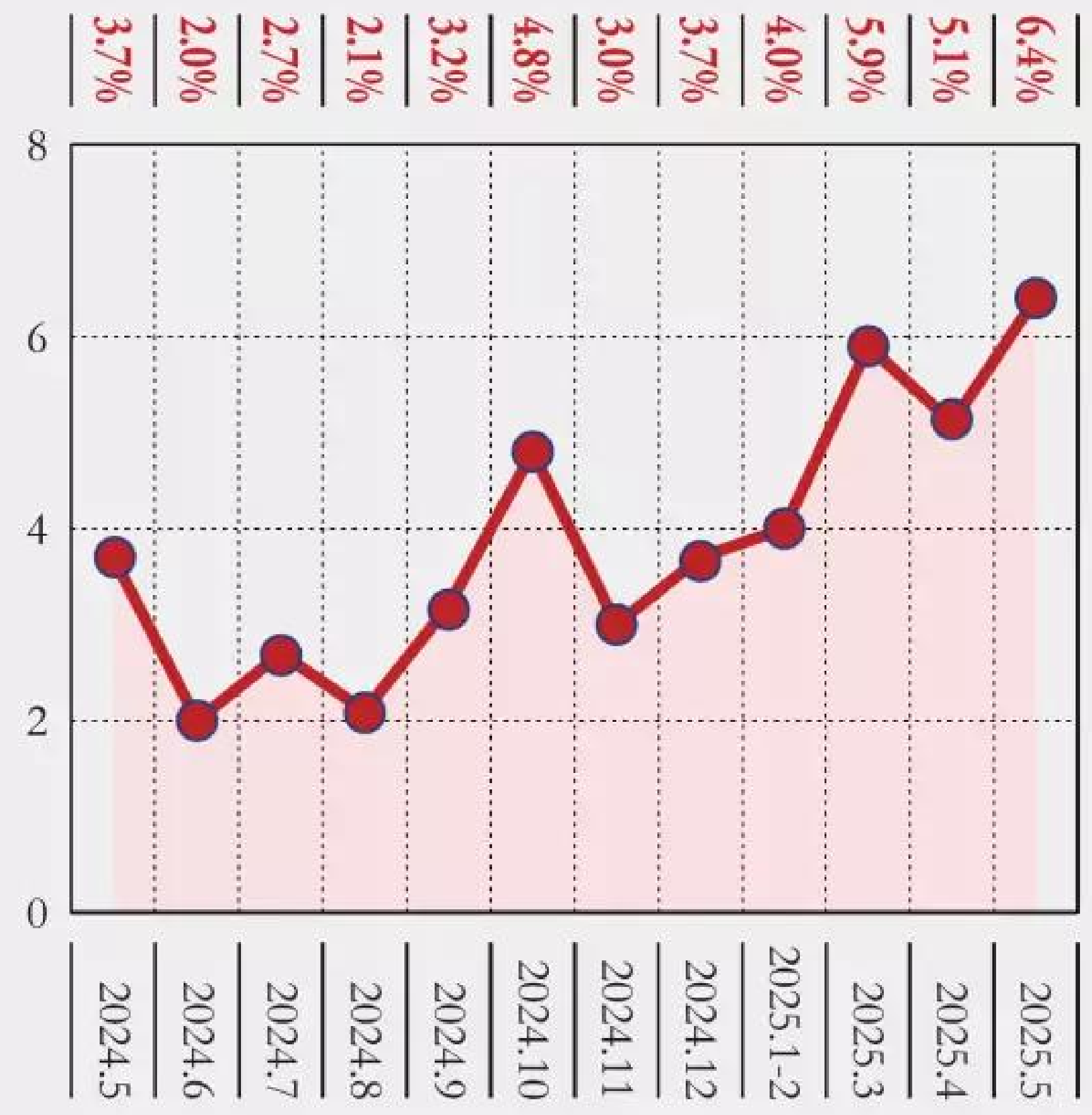
China By Numbers

6.4 percent

Year-on-year rise in total retail sales of consumer goods in May, the highest since February 2024

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Year-on-year change in the total retail sales of consumer goods between May 2024 and May 2025

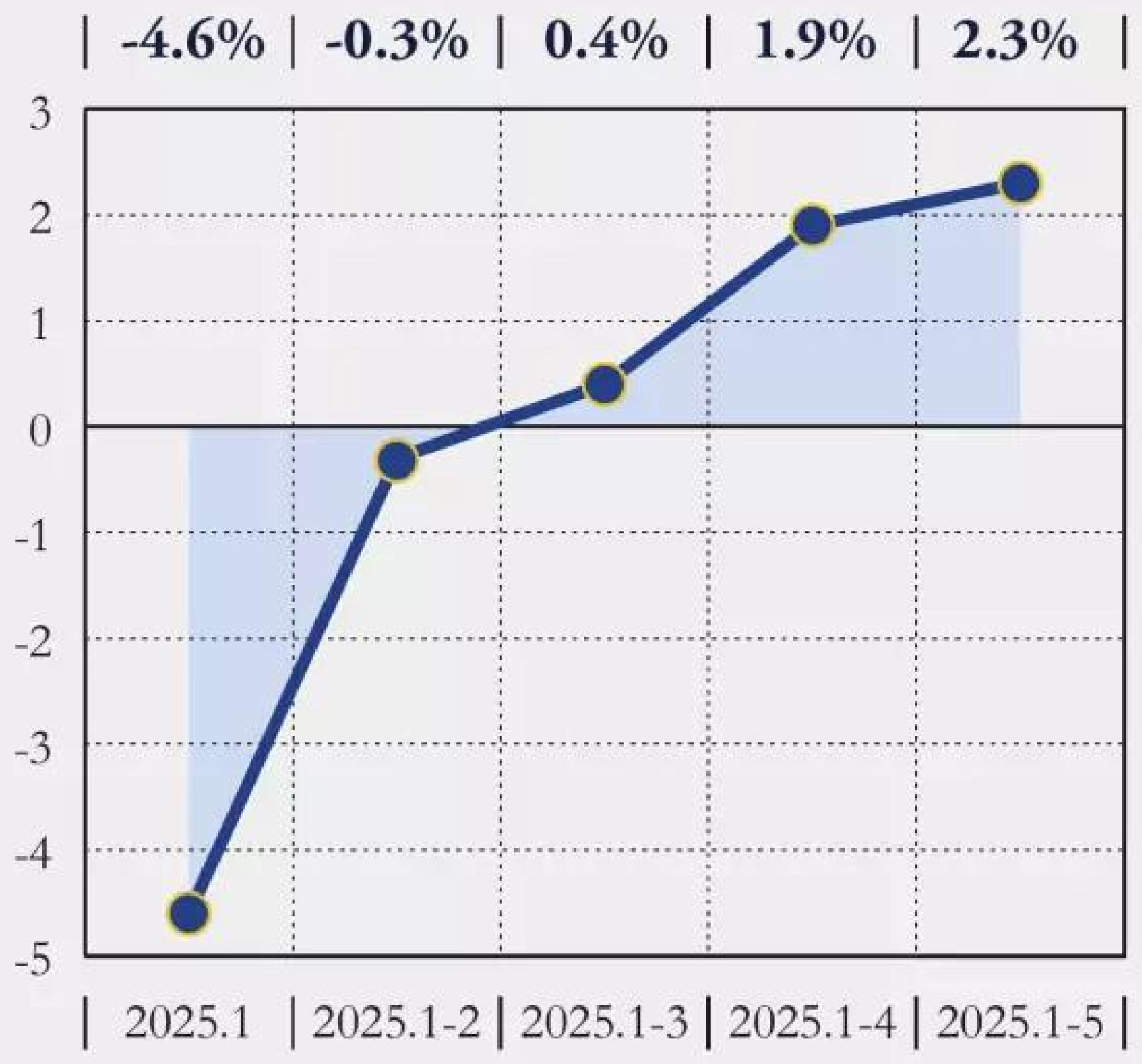


2.3 percent

Year-on-year growth in exports and imports of foreign-invested enterprises in China in the first five months of 2025, totalling 5.21 trillion yuan

Source: General Administration of Customs of China

Year-on-year change in exports and imports of foreign-invested enterprises



14 years

The average years of schooling for new employees in 2024

Source: National Development and Reform Commission of China

US$539.4 billion

The balance of foreign currency loans at the end of May, a year-on-year drop of 16.3 percent, while foreign currency loans decreased by US$2.7 billion in the first five months of 2025

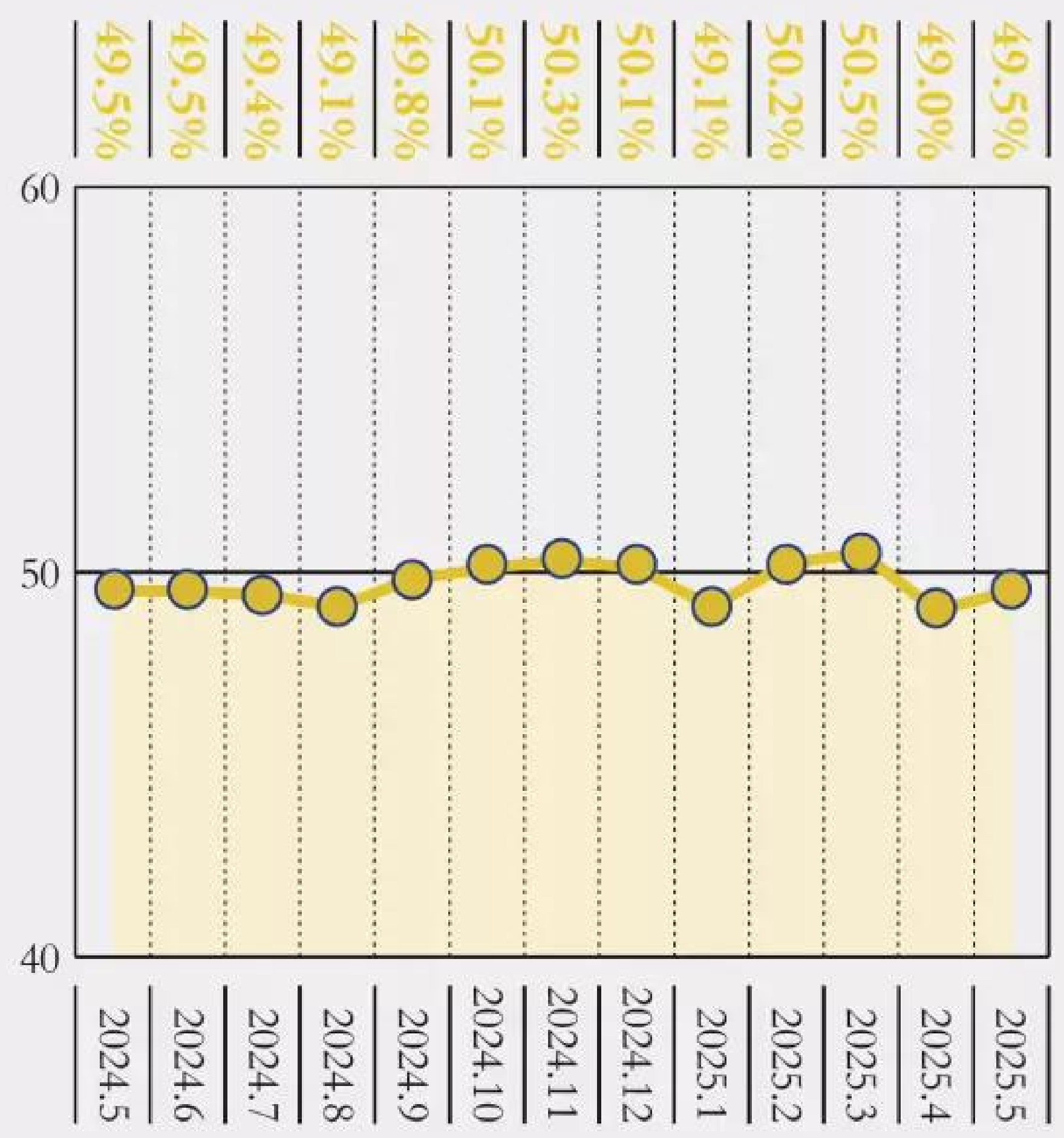
Source: State Administration of Foreign Exchange of China

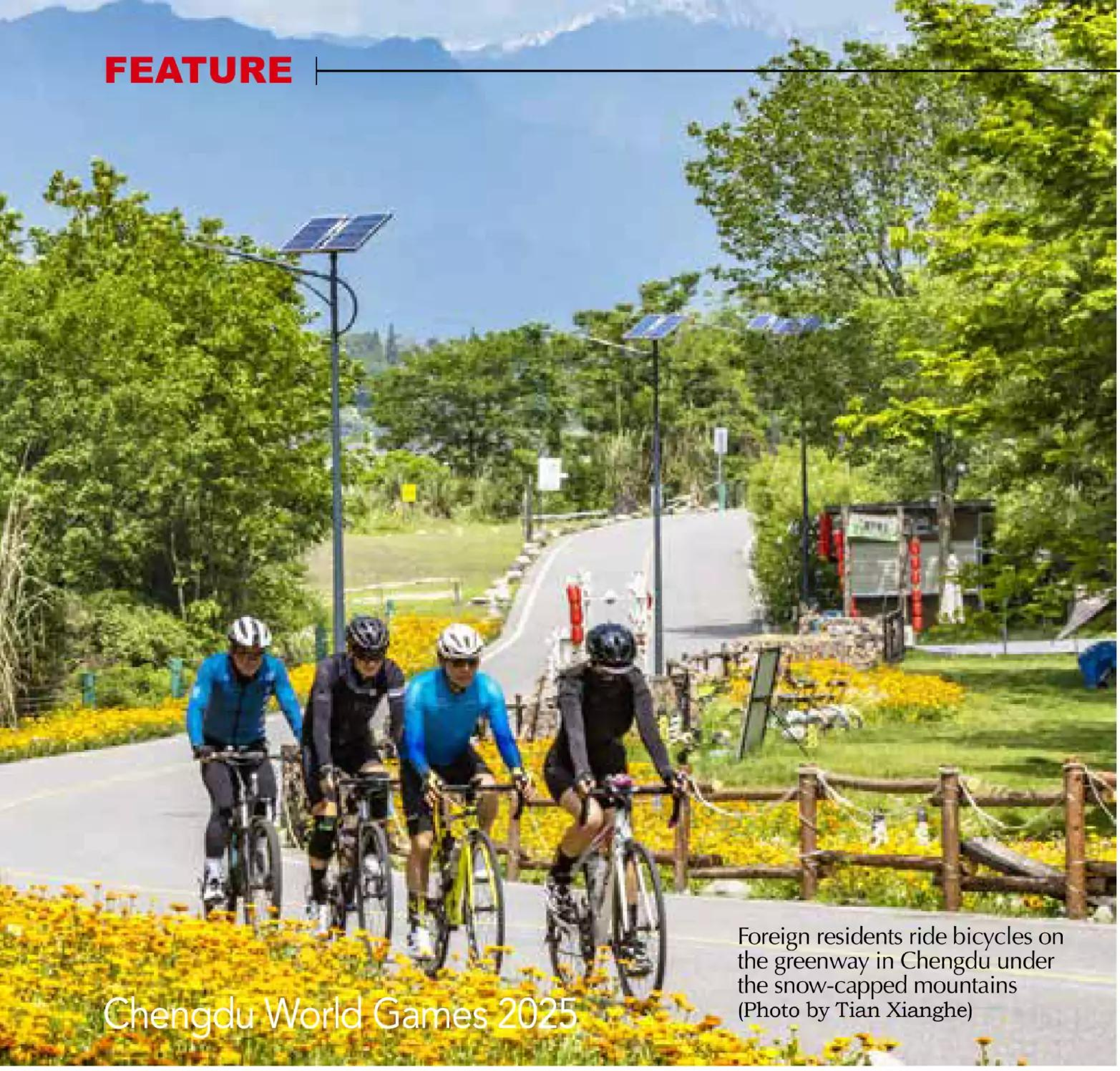
49.5%

The purchasing managers' index (PMI) for China's manufacturing sector in May, a rise of 0.5 percentage points over the previous month

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

PMI for China's manufacturing sector





Chengdu World Games 2025

Foreign residents ride bicycles on the greenway in Chengdu under the snow-capped mountains (Photo by Tian Xianghe)

Sporting Soul

From the Universiade to the World Games, from table tennis and football to niche games like bocce and TRX suspension workout, Chengdu, known for its relaxing life style, is building up its dynamic vibe

By He Shaoqing

For Lamia Arab, a British teacher at Chengdu University, a vigorous bike ride along the city's greenways on Saturday mornings is her favourite way to kick off the weekend in Chengdu, capital city of Southwest China's Sichuan Province.

Having moved from the Thames riverside to the banks of Flower-Bathing Brook Park, Lamia has lived in this park-like city beneath snow-capped mountains for eight years. She says she initially came to Chengdu for the giant pandas but has grown to love the city through sports. As she noted, from frisbee and bocce to battle ropes and TRX suspension training – no matter how obscure your favourite sport is, you can always find like-minded workout buddies in Chengdu.

Lamia's life journey reflects how sports have opened a new window for the world to discover Chengdu. With its friendly and inclusive urban charm, endearing giant pandas and ubiquitous sports culture, Chengdu has become an ideal city for a growing number of international residents.

Active City

Andy, a British football enthusiast and founder of Chengdu International Football League (CIFL), recalls that when he first arrived in the city over a decade ago, there was only one expat football club. But last year alone, Chengdu hosted over 26,000 football matches– averaging more than 70 games per day across the city. As Chengdu's international

Foreign football enthusiasts play on the pitch in Chengdu (Photo Courtesy of Chengdu Football Association)

The World Games torch “Bamboo Dream” and medals“ Bamboo Lights” (Photo Courtesy of the Executive Committee of The World Games 2025 Chengdu)

community expanded and sports facilities multiplied, Andy and his friends established the CIFL. Today, it boasts nearly 1,000 football enthusiasts from more than 50 countries and regions.

Chengdu’s passion for sports shines as brightly under the spotlight of world-class events as it does in the vibrant energy of its everyday street life. From global spectacles like the Chengdu Universiade, World Table Tennis Championships and Thomas & Uber Cup in badminton, to major domestic leagues such as the Chinese Super League in football and the Chinese Basketball Association, down to community basketball tournaments and inter-village football matches, the city hosts over a thousand annual events, forming a multi-tiered sports ecosystem. Much more than just athletic arenas, these competitions have become dynamic stages for multicultural exchanges.

The “2025 China Cross-Border Tourism Development Report” released by travel specialist Ctrip in May ranks Chengdu as the most-searched Chinese city by international travellers on Ctrip’s global platforms in 2024. “Exploring Chengdu through sports events” has emerged as a new trend among global visitors.

“In Chengdu, happiness is simple – you can watch world-class events right in your neighbourhood.” This sentiment from Zizo Mohammed, an Egyptian educator working in Chengdu, echoes the feelings of many expatriates in the city. The young man, who once believed that “every Chinese person is a table tennis master,” has grown deeply fond of China’s national sport after attending high-level competitions like the World Table Tennis Championships and the ITTF Mixed Team World Cup in Chengdu.

What impresses Zizo even more are Chengdu’s abundant and accessible sports facilities. From smart-upgraded professional venues to community-embedded fitness spaces, the “15-minute fitness circle” has made sports an effortless part of daily life for foreigners in the city.

World Games

Beyond traditional sports like table tennis and football, Chengdu is now witnessing a surge in niche and trendy athletic pursuits. As the highest-level international multi-sport event for non-Olympic disciplines, the upcoming Chengdu World Games (August 7-17) marks the Chinese mainland’s first time hosting this competition. Following the Chengdu Universiade, this will be another international multi-sport event held in China’s western region.

To boost public engagement, Chengdu has installed free experiential stations across the city for months, allowing residents to try World Games events firsthand – some international enthusiasts even flew in specially to participate. Through initiatives like “World

运动无限 气象万千
Boundless Sports, Countless Wonders
THE WORLD GAMES
TWG 2025 CHENGDU

"World Games Space" activities into the community (Photo Courtesy of the Executive Committee of The World Games 2025 Chengdu)

Excellent sports venues in Chengdu provide a great playing field for expats who love the World Games sport of frisbee (Photo Courtesy of Chengdu Frisbee Sports Association)

Games Spaces" and "World Games Curriculum" in communities, schools, and parks, Chengdu has creatively "miniaturised" these sporting events, immersing more people in this accessible World Games feast right at their doorstep.

An official from the Chengdu Sports Bureau stated that the city has fully leveraged the legacy of the Universiade for the upcoming World Games. Notably, no new venues were constructed as Chengdu strategically repurposed existing facilities to configure 27 competition venues. Among these, 18 underwent partial upgrades, while nine were purpose-built utilising the city's lakes and parks.

Following the Universiade, Chengdu's sports venues were opened to the public following the principle of "maximising competition potential, ensuring comprehensive accessibility, and implementing phased openings." Municipal and district venues primarily serving public sports functions now operate under strict accessibility standards: offering free or low-cost access for no fewer than 330 days annually, with weekly free or low-cost access at certain times.

This legacy approach will be adopted by the World Games, permanently preserving seven of the temporary venues for the event, which will be repurposed for public benefit. This initiative supports Chengdu's development of "sports+" urban consumption ecosystems, ensuring that residents will sustainably enjoy the dividends of international sporting events.

Guided by the principle of "sponsorship first, borrowing over renting, and renting over purchasing," the Chengdu World Games has optimised its equipment procurement strategy. By collabourating with international sports federations to utilise their certified equipment and repurposing gear from the Universiade, the event is configuring competition apparatus through a mix of rentals, reused items, and selective purchases – significantly reducing procurement costs.

All 27 competition venues and sites are now fully prepared, with multiple test events already underway for disciplines like underwater sports, lifesaving for pool events and bocce . After observing these test competitions, José Perurena López, President of the International World Games Association announced that Chengdu is ready for the event.

Chengdu University where Lamia teaches was once the heart of the Universiade Village and key competition venues. Two years ago, this campus pulsed with youthful energy as athletes from around the world chased their dreams here. Now, roles have seamlessly transitioned – many students originally inspired by the Universiade have become volunteers for the World Games, working diligently on the frontlines of the new event's preparation.

Reflecting on this evolution, Lamia believes that from the global spotlight of the Universiade to the dynamic continuation of the World Games, this city that always moves in rhythm with the world is building stages for sporting exchange through its vitality and warmth, extending sincere invitations to the globe.★

Xianju Bayberries

Ripe for Success

By Zhang Yicong and Guo Tianqi

According to the traditional Chinese calendar, Mangzhong, the solar term marking the ripening of grain, fell on June 5 this year. As midsummer rains arrive and temperatures rise, Mangzhong is a time when people crave something refreshing. And as if on cue, the tangy-sweet bayberry ripens in southeastern Zhejiang Province.

China produces 95 percent of the world's bayberries. Among them, those from Xianju County in the city of Taizhou stand out for their unique character. The old-growth bayberry forests of Xianju, which literally means "the land of immortals," is now an ecologically protected area. Today, Xianju bayberries have even made their way to Dubai, with a single bayberry sold up to around US$8.40. So, what is it about Xianju bayberries that makes the world crave them?

The Shenxianju Scenic Area. (Photo Courtesy of the Xianju County Government)

Xianju bayberries. (Photo Courtesy of the Xianju County Government)

Berried Treasure

For over a millennium, the people of Xianju have practised an integrated "bayberry-tea-chicken-bee" agroforestry system. In this model, bayberry groves provide shade, free-range chickens control pests, native bees pollinate the trees and beeswax aids in incubation.

Today, this traditional system has been recognised as the world's first bayberry-related Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

"This year's bayberries are larger and taste even better, with top-quality fruit fetching up to 50 yuan (US$7) each," said Hu Yingjun, a young farmer beaming with pride as harvest season began. Since returning home in 2021 to start his business, Hu has been experimenting with new pruning techniques. He attributes much of Xianju's competitive edge to modernisation and the rise of new quality productive forces.

From drone-assisted cultivation and automated harvesting tracks to branded livestream marketing, the bayberry industry in Xianju is embracing smart and digital tools across the entire supply chain, from growing to production to sales.

Cultural tourism centred on bayberries has also become a local highlight. In Potan Ancient Town, a historical drama titled Bayberry Merchant Guild is in development. Meanwhile, the ancient residences of Gaoqian Village and the terraced fields and karst formations of Gongyu Village offer unique experiences. Even "Bayberry Immortal" NFTs are bringing the heritage into the blockchain age, offering virtual ownership of ancient bayberry trees.

Juicy Story

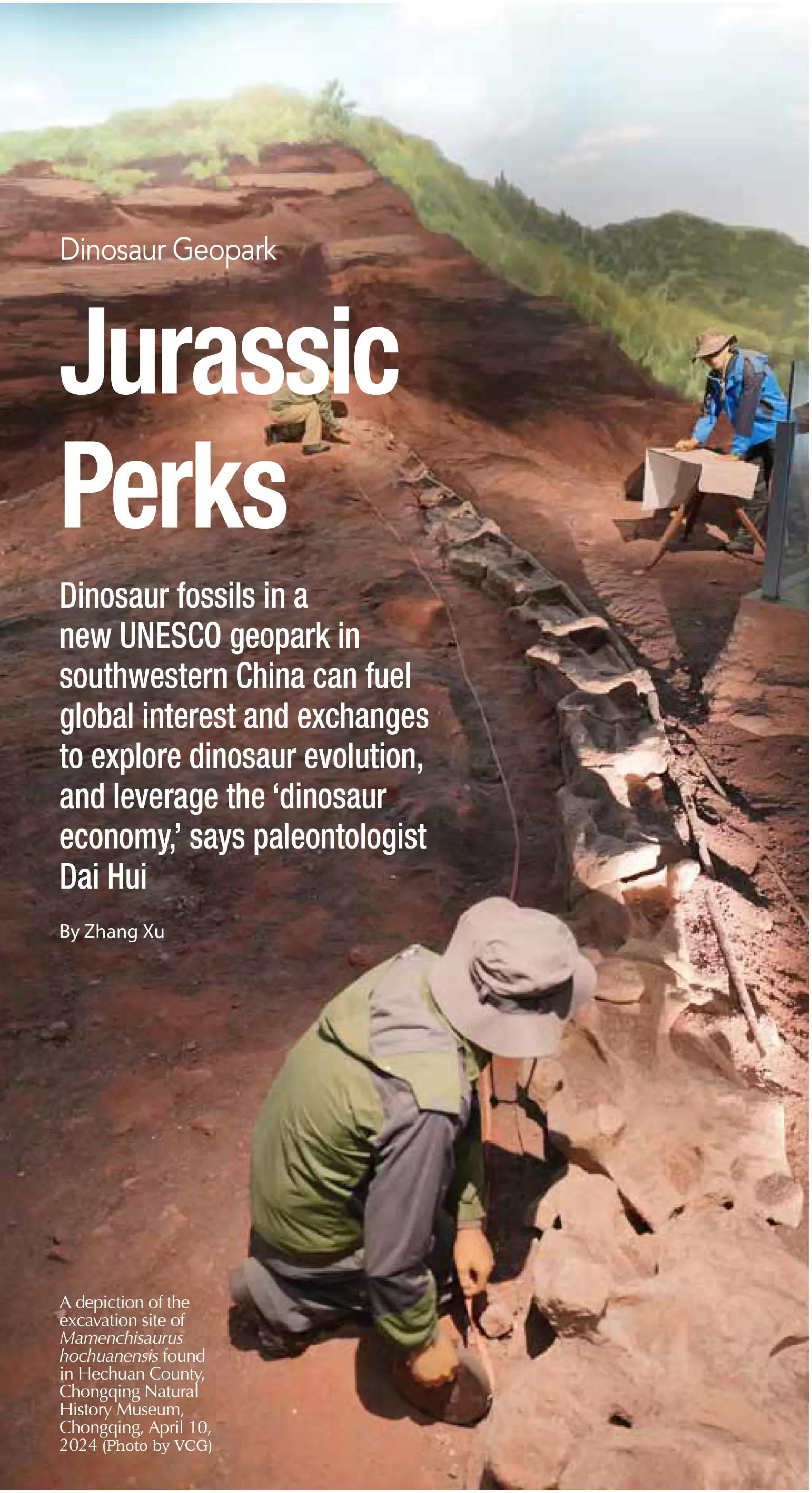
Since 2021, Xianju bayberries have steadily expanded into overseas markets, including Canada, Singapore, the UAE and the Netherlands. Last year, new destinations such as France, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have been added, with export value surpassing US$800,000.

But the true beginning of a global "bayberry culture" lies in letting the fruit tell its own story worldwide. That story begins at Xianju's Shenxianju Scenic Area, a national geopark that is also the spiritual home of the bayberry.

The region's volcanic rhyolite and sandstone geology provides ideal conditions for bayberry growth, forging a deep connection between the landscape and the fruit.

In recent years, cultural exchanges with South Korea have given Shenxianju new global appeal. Since 2014, the China-South Korea International Mountaineering Event has drawn climbers from both countries, creating a new platform for cross-cultural friendship.

"Especially after China lifted visa requirements for South Koreans in December 2024, visiting Shenxianju and tasting Xianju bayberries has become a favourite weekend getaway," said Kim Young-jun, Consul General of South Korea in Shanghai, at the 10th edition of the event.★



Dinosaur Geopark

Jurassic Perks

Dinosaur fossils in a new UNESCO geopark in southwestern China can fuel global interest and exchanges to explore dinosaur evolution, and leverage the 'dinosaur economy,' says paleontologist Dai Hui

By Zhang Xu

A depiction of the excavation site of *Mamenchisaurus hochuanensis* found in Hechuan County, Chongqing Natural History Museum, Chongqing, April 10, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

In April, two geoparks in China were officially designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as Global Geoparks. One is in Yunyang County, part of Chongqing Municipality in the country's southwest, and the other is the Kanbula National Geopark in Qinghai Province in the country's northwest.

Currently 229 sites, including 16 newly added ones in April, from 50 countries are recognised as UNESCO Global Geoparks for their international geological significance and management integrating protection, education and sustainable development. Among them, 49 are from China, more than any other country in the world.

Yunyang, located in the Three Georges Reservoir area, boasts a history of around 2,400 years as a county. But the two most important geological features of the Yunyang Geopark have a much longer history. The limestone karst landscape of the region, typically represented by the 335-metre deep sinkholes, one of the world's deepest, formed 65 million years ago, around the time an asteroid slammed into Earth, thought to have caused the mass extinction of the dinosaurs. In February 2023, the construction of a national radar network project for deep-space observation of asteroids started in Yunyang.

Just six kilometres from the radar site is the "Great Wall of Dinosaur Fossils," an 18-kilometre stretch of rock layers packed with fossils dating back nearly 170 million years. "In one extraordinary section, around 5,000 dinosaur fossils are exposed, offering unique insights into dinosaur evolution during the Middle Jurassic," according to UNESCO. In an interview with China News Service (CNS), Dai Hui, vice president of the Chongqing Paleontological Institute, shared his insights on how to make use of China's rich dinosaur fossil resources and improve scientific and cultural exchanges with the world.

CNS: How did Yunyang Geopark make its way onto the UNESCO list?

Dai Hui: The UNESCO Global Geoparks designation was created in 2015, building on an international partnership known as the Global Geoparks Network (GGN) first initiated in 2004. [Eight] Chinese geoparks [along with 17 in Europe] were founding members of the GGN [with the support of UNESCO].

Yunyang Geopark is home to geological relics of global significance and rich natural and cultural resources, with remarkable achievements in geological conservation, scientific research and education, and these meet the requirements of being a Global Geopark.

Yunyang Geopark covers an area of 1,124 square kilometres. It's home to geological relics, natural and cultural heritage that require special protection, as well as sustainable development communities with quite a number of residents, which aligns with the idea of how a Global Geopark should develop.

A wall of dinosaur fossils at the Dinosaur Fossil Site Museum at Yunyang Geopark, Yunyang County, Chongqing, October 1, 2024 (Photo by IC)

CNS: What role did the vast trove of dinosaur fossils play in Yunyang's successful Global Geopark designation?

DH: The Yunyang Middle Jurassic dinosaur fossil fauna is Yunyang Geopark's only world-class geological remnant. It leads the world in number, type and distribution of dinosaur fossils.

Chongqing Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources moved quickly after dinosaur fossils were first discovered in Yunyang in 2015, carrying out research which eventually led to identification of the dinosaur fauna. Major progress and discoveries so far include excavation of the largest single Jurassic dinosaur fossil wall in the world, excavation of over 10,000 dinosaur bone fossils, the discovery and naming of six new dinosaur species, and the discovery and identification of a new dinosaur fauna, which has filled a key gap in [our knowledge of] dinosaur evolution. Research results include the publication of 30 academic papers and two monographs, and the compilation of China's first technical standard for the protection of paleontological fossils. Released and implemented by the Ministry of Natural Resources of China in 2023, the standard focuses on practices for excavation, preparation, reconstruction and mounting of vertebrate fossils.

These key achievements have provided the main support for Yunyang's successful bid for the Global Geopark designation.

CNS: You were on the research team. Were there any unexpected discoveries about Yunyang's fossils?

DH: The dinosaur fossil sites found in Chongqing before were ones with a single dinosaur for each site, such as the *Mamenchisaurus hochuanensis* [a type of sauropod with a long neck] found in Hechuan County [in 1972].

The discovery of the Yunyang dinosaur fauna could be called a breakthrough in the history of Chongqing's dinosaur research. It is the first time that the site of a dinosaur fossil fauna has been found in Chongqing. The fossils of this fauna are widely distributed along the geological layers, stretching up to 18 kilometres, and it is known as the Great Wall of Dinosaur Fossils. The fossils are also densely buried, with a 150-metre-long, six-metre-high dinosaur fossil wall that exposes about 5,000 fossils.

The fauna boasts three significant features: the first is its long age span, with the fossil layers ranging from the early to late Middle Jurassic [around 164 million to 163 million years ago]. The second feature is the rich variety of dinosaurs, including sauropods, theropods, basal ornithischians, stegosauruses, as well as companion species such as plesiosaurs, crocodilians, fishes and tortoises. The third feature is the complete sequence of all developmental stages, ranging from juvenile to adult.

In scientific research, we achieved a multitude of key attainments. The discovery of the earliest basal new ornithischians [an herbivorous dinosaur superficially similar to birds], the discovery of one of the world's earliest stegosauruses, the discovery of Chongqing's earliest theropods [dinosaurs that walk on two legs, like a T. rex], as well as the revelation of evidence for sauropods' evolution towards gigantism, among others. So far, six new dinosaur species have been named, which has significantly boosted Chongqing's influence in the international paleontological academic community.

The Yunyang dinosaur fossil fauna has filled a gap in dinosaur evolution that is critical to research. There had been a lack of complete fossil records in most parts of the world, due to absence of strata formations from the late-Early Jurassic to the early-Middle Jurassic, and the Middle Jurassic was recognised as the key stage for dinosaurs' evolution towards gigantism. The discovery of the Yunyang dinosaur fauna has not only filled the gap in the dinosaur's evolutionary chain during the Jurassic, but also provided important tangible evidence for related research, which is of great scientific significance.

CNS: China boasts a wealth of dinosaur fossil resources. How can we best make use of them to promote dinosaur research and cultural exchanges with the rest of the world?

DH: So far, fossils of over 300 dinosaur species have been discovered in China, making the country a major source of dinosaur fossils. Compared with Western countries, China is a rather late starter in dinosaur fossil research. Although China's scientific discoveries of dinosaur fossils date back to the beginning of the 20th century, research led by Chinese scientists had not been conducted until 1938 with the discovery of the *Lufengosaurus huenei* [a type of proto-sauropod found in Lufeng, Yunnan Province.] Over the near-century-long period that followed, China has risen from being a seeker and learner to an innovator and leader in multiple aspects, making it an indisputable force in global dinosaur research.

The Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP) under the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), is a leader in China's dinosaur research, contributing most of the country's research achievements, with related papers frequently appearing in Nature and Science, among other top academic journals.

Scientific research is not an isolated effort. It requires exchanges with and learning from scholars from elsewhere in the world. Based on China's rich fossil resources, we have worked together with global researchers, learned advanced research methods and techniques, as well as promoted academic exchanges and visits, which has contributed to the development of the discipline.

Since culture is a big topic, I will give a small example. Many new dinosaur genera and species found in China have been named with elements of local history and culture. For instance, the *Bashanosaurus primitivus* discovered in Chongqing is one of the earliest stegosauruses found in the world. When naming it, we adopted the Taoist word *yuanshi* (*primitivus*) as the species name, and *bashan* as the genus name, reflecting the place of discovery [*ba* is the ancient name of Chongqing, *shan* means mountains, and Chongqing is a mountainous place]. When foreign scholars learn about this dinosaur, they will want to find out how the genus name was given, which will also promote Chinese culture.

Western countries have long tapped into the "dinosaur economy" across a multitude of dimensions, ranging from film and TV production to museums and amusement parks, among others. Successful cases include the *Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic World* films, the dinosaur halls of the American Museum of Natural History and the UK's Natural History Museum, as well as Jurassic Parks at Universal resorts. We could learn from them, and activate China's dinosaur fossil resources. That will propel the local economy, foster China's own dinosaur brands and let the world know more about China's dinosaurs.★

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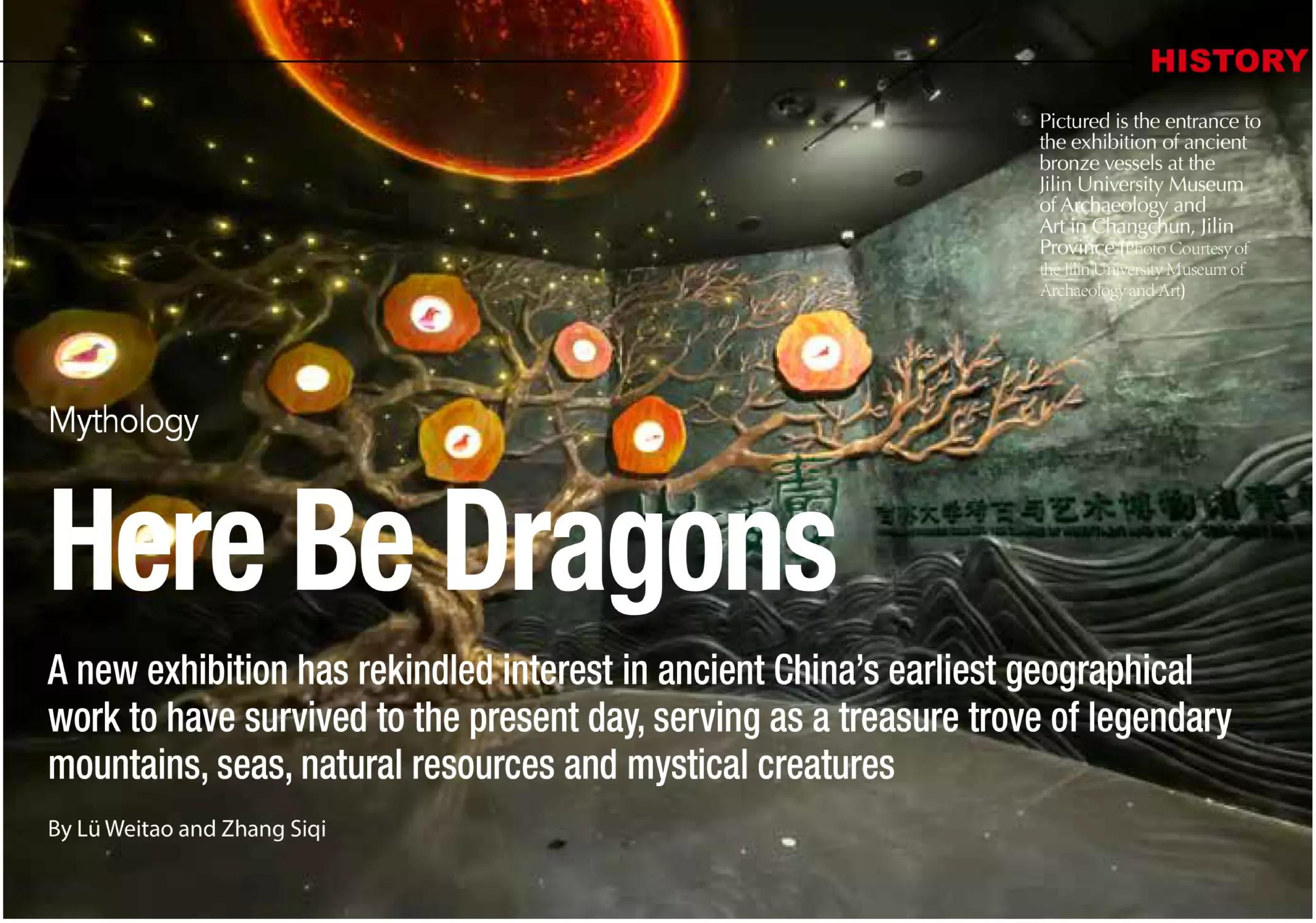
Parents dressed up as dinosaurs run with their children during a sports day event at a nursery in Yantai, Shandong Province, June 1, 2023 (Photo by VCG)



Pictured is the entrance to the exhibition of ancient bronze vessels at the Jilin University Museum of Archaeology and Art in Changchun, Jilin Province (Photo Courtesy of the Jilin University Museum of Archaeology and Art)

Mythology

Here Be Dragons

A new exhibition has rekindled interest in ancient China's earliest geographical work to have survived to the present day, serving as a treasure trove of legendary mountains, seas, natural resources and mystical creatures

By Lü Weitao and Zhang Siqi

An ongoing exhibition of bronze vessels at the Jilin University Museum of Archaeology and Art in Changchun in Northeast China's Jilin Province has revived interest in the earliest written Chinese geographical work to have survived into the modern era.

Known as one of the three ancient Chinese masterpieces, together with the *Book of Changes* and the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a significant ancient Chinese compendium of history, geography, mythology, ethnology, religion and medicine.

Jilin University Museum threads the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* through its exhibition, unfolding the tapestry of the ancient classic through bronze artefacts. More than 180 bronze relics are on display, telling the story of how bronze vessels evolved from ritual sacrificial vessels during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600-256 BCE) into practical vessels for everyday use by the time of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE).

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* has 18 chapters divided into two sections: Classic of the Mountains and Classic of the Seas. Classic of the Mountains provides detailed descriptions of mountain ranges and their associated rivers and waterways, as well as natural resources found in and around the mountains.

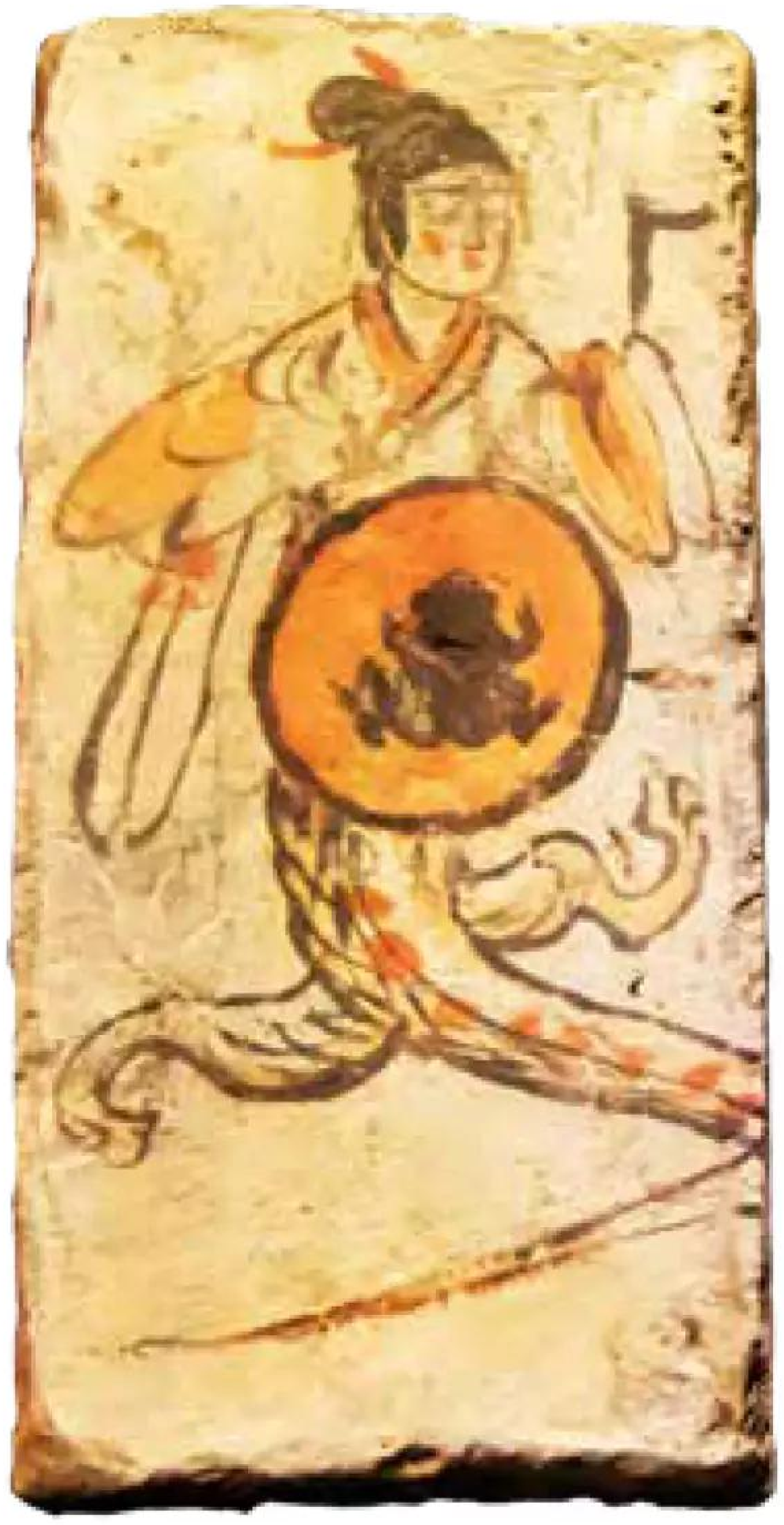
As the most valuable section of the book, Classic of the Mountains divides the country into five parts, each covering a different direction: East, South, West, North and Central Mountains. The mountains are described in a consistent writing style, the text resembling a rigourous observation log.

Compared with the structured Classic of the Mountains, Classic of the Seas is written in a more fluid style. It documents bodies of water, coastal regions and their islands. It includes descriptions of a wide variety of mythical creatures that inhabit the seas and coasts. A sub-section titled Classic of the Great Wilderness goes even further, describing a vast and chaotic world that extends far beyond known geographical boundaries into a mythical realm.

Academic opinions used to be widely divided on who the author was and when the book was written. Modern scholars generally agree that it was not written by a single person at any particular time, but was continuously added to and revised between the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) and the beginning of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE). While scholars generally confirm the authenticity of the records in Classic of the Mountains, they mostly hold that Classic of the Seas deals with an imaginary and fantastical world.

Geography Meets Witches

From the Han Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* was seen as a geographical work. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), however, the book was reclassified as a novel, because of its bizarre and fantastical content and inaccurate records of geographical directions. Today, most Chinese regard the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* as mythology. For Western readers accustomed to Greek mythology and Norse sagas, the style in which the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is written might come as a shock. It resembles neither the Homeric epic nor Eddic poetry and prose. Instead, it is an encyclopedic mythology that combines a geographic compendium, a species guide and a witchcraft manual.



A brick with a portrait of Nüwa, dating back to the Wei and Jin dynasties (220-420), found in Gaotai County, Gansu Province (Photo by VCG)

Chen Lianshan, lecturer of folklore and mythology at Peking University, interprets the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* as a government-compiled and somewhat primitive geographical treatise. According to Chen, the significant discrepancies between the records in the book and the reality today are easily explained by the great changes that took place over time. Mountains may remain steadfast, but waterways and natural surroundings are highly variable.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the book is its treasure trove of mythology. The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* stands out as the most significant mythological text from ancient China. As Lu Xun, father of modern Chinese literature, noted, "China's myths and legends have yet to be compiled into a dedicated book, remaining scattered throughout ancient texts, with a significant concentration found in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*."

The mythological gods, deities, spirits and creatures described in the book are referenced in many places throughout Chinese folklore. Three of the most well-known stories are "Nüwa Patching the Sky," "Jingwei Filling the Sea" and "Kuafu Chasing the Sun."

The first story is about the mother of the Chinese nation, Nüwa. Legend has it that after Nüwa created humans, they lived peacefully and happily for a long time. One year, the water god Gonggong and fire god Zhurong started fighting. In the end, the fire god emerged victorious. Feeling angry and ashamed, the water god smashed his head against Mount Buzhou Mountain, a giant pillar supporting the sky. The mountain collapsed, which allowed a corner of the sky to fall. On the ground, enormous cracks opened, forests erupted in flames, floodwaters spurted from the ground and ferocious creatures wrought havoc.

Nüwa felt terribly distressed and decided to patch up the sky to put an end to the human suffering. She collected multi-coloured stones, set a great fire to smelt them into a slurry, and used the slurry to plaster up the hole. Then she chopped the feet off a giant turtle and used them as four pillars to support the sky. After Nüwa's toil, the sky was mended, the ground was even, the waters stopped and the people once again lived in peace and happiness.

The second story "Jingwei Filling the Sea" tells of the youngest daughter of the Yan Emperor, who was a legendary tribal leader in ancient China and revered as one of the founding ancestors of the Chinese people. One day the girl went swimming in the Eastern Sea and drowned. After her death, her soul transformed into a divine bird called Jingwei, which resembled a raven, with a patterned head, white beak and red feet. Enraged with the sea that had taken her life, Jingwei began to carry branches and stones from the Western Mountain, day in and day out, to fill up the Eastern Sea.

Today, Jingwei filling the sea is not just an ancient story, but has also become an idiom describing a futile and never-ending task. Jingwei can be seen as the Chinese equivalent of Sisyphus from Greek mythology, who was cursed by Zeus to roll an enchanted boulder uphill forever. From another perspective, both Jingwei and Sisyphus represent a positive meaning – dogged determination in the face of overwhelming odds.

"Kuafu Chasing the Sun" is also associated with the Yan Emperor. Kuafu, a descendant of the Yan Emperor, was a giant with immense strength. In his time, the sun scorched the earth, making life unbearable. Kuafu decided to chase the sun and stop it from causing so much suffering. He set out westwards, running with incredible speed to catch the sun. As he ran, he drank from rivers and lakes to quench his thirst, but the heat from the sun was so intense that he could not find enough water. Eventually, he collapsed from exhaustion and dehydration. As he fell, he transformed into a mountain, and his wooden staff turned into a forest of peach trees. The forest provided shelter for travellers, and the peaches quenched their thirst.

Kuafu is often interpreted as a symbol of human determination and the pursuit of the impossible. Despite his failure, Kuafu's spirit of perseverance

Top: Bronze wine vessels are displayed at the exhibition held at the Jilin University Museum of Archaeology and Art in Changchun, Jilin Province, May 2, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

and his willingness to sacrifice himself for the greater good are still celebrated in Chinese culture. The story of Kuafu has not only inspired writers and artists, but in 2022 the name Kuafu was chosen for China's first satellite designed to carry out comprehensive probes of the sun.

Imagination Meme

Many parts of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* reflect knowledge from the ancient Chinese astronomical calendar. Classic of the Great Wilderness records seven mountains in the east, arranged from south to north in a longitudinal line. In the first half of each year, the sun rises from the southernmost mountain to the northernmost mountain, while in the second half of the year, the sun reverses its direction, rising from the northernmost mountain to the southernmost mountain. This way, the ancient Chinese could roughly determine the season and the month by observing from behind which mountain the sun was rising.

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* also contains crucial information on early medicine, as well as omens to avoid catastrophe. It documents 124 types of medicinal substances, symptoms of 57 diseases and an array of treatment methods. It also records a creature called *li*, and mentions that whenever it appears, a great plague will occur. This *li* might be today's red-bellied squirrel. Modern scientific research has proven that the red-bellied squirrel is a natural carrier of the plague pathogen. People in the time of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* had already discovered the association between the creature and the plague, and their records of this association are correct.

By the Tang and Song dynasties from the 7th to 13th centuries, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* had already made its way to Japan, exerting influence on the Japanese folklore and later anime culture. But the first complete English translation did not appear until 1999, translated by Anne Birrell and published by Penguin Classics.

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* constructs a fascinating and enigmatic universe composed of over 400 mountains, 300 water systems, 300 mythical creatures and 200 deities and spirits. The text is not only a valuable source of historical and cultural information but also a treasure trove of myths and legends that continue to inspire modern interpretations and studies.

This masterpiece weaves a rich tapestry of the Chinese romantic imagination that has formed since ancient times and provides a unique window into the ancient Chinese understanding of the natural world. It embodies the quest for a harmonious union between themselves and their biophysical and socio-anthropological environment, conceiving themselves as an integral part of the cosmos.★

NEWS CHINA
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A canal in Anchang Ancient Town, Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province (Photo by Zhang Yajing)

Shaoxing

Water into Wine

For a tipple of China's iconic yellow wine, a taste of stinky tofu or tracing the footsteps of literary giant Lu Xun, look no further than charming water town Shaoxing

By Zhang Yajing

If most people think of a colour associated with China, they would probably say red. But there's an argument to be made that it is yellow. The mythical first emperor was the Yellow Emperor. Chinese civilisation grew up around the Yellow River. However, there is another yellow deserves a spot in that pantheon – yellow wine, or *huangjiu*. And if you want to get to know this tipple better, there's no finer place to do it than Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province, just south of Shanghai in the Yangtze River Delta, an area known as Jiangnan.

Yellow wine is thought to have emerged in China 3,000 years ago, around the Spring and Autumn Period (770-221 BCE), and it's since been drunk by emperors, literati and the common people. Shaoxing has long been famous for its yellow wine, apparently due to the pure water used to make it, sourced from the city's Mirror Lake.

The amber wine is usually fermented from rice, has a mild and slightly sweet taste with notes of fruitiness. It's normally around 15 percent alcohol, but that can vary based on how long it's brewed. To a Western drinker, it may bring to mind sherry, the wine often suggested as a substitute for "Shaoxing wine" in foreign cookbooks.

Among several prominent local producers, Nǚ Ér Hong, or "daughter's red," has an interesting origin story. There is a tradition in Shaoxing that when a girl is born, a jar of wine is brewed and stored underground on the day of her birth, and only dug out and opened on her wedding day. This is thought to be the best length of time to brew a batch of yellow wine.

To get the lowdown on the city's ancient wine culture, as well as a decent buzz, head to the Shaoxing Yellow Wine Museum where you can explore the fermentation process, and enjoy wine tasting and making. Alternatively, if you come in the autumn, the city puts on an annual Shaoxing Yellow Wine Festival to experience all types of yellow wine and its culture. However, as yellow wine is also widely homebrewed, you can have an experience of grassroots culture throughout the city. Try getting a cab out to the city's suburbs and eating at a village home-cum-restaurant – they'll likely have a few clay pots filled with wine for you to sample. Some of them can be found in Xilu Village near Kuiji Mountain scenic spot in the city's west.

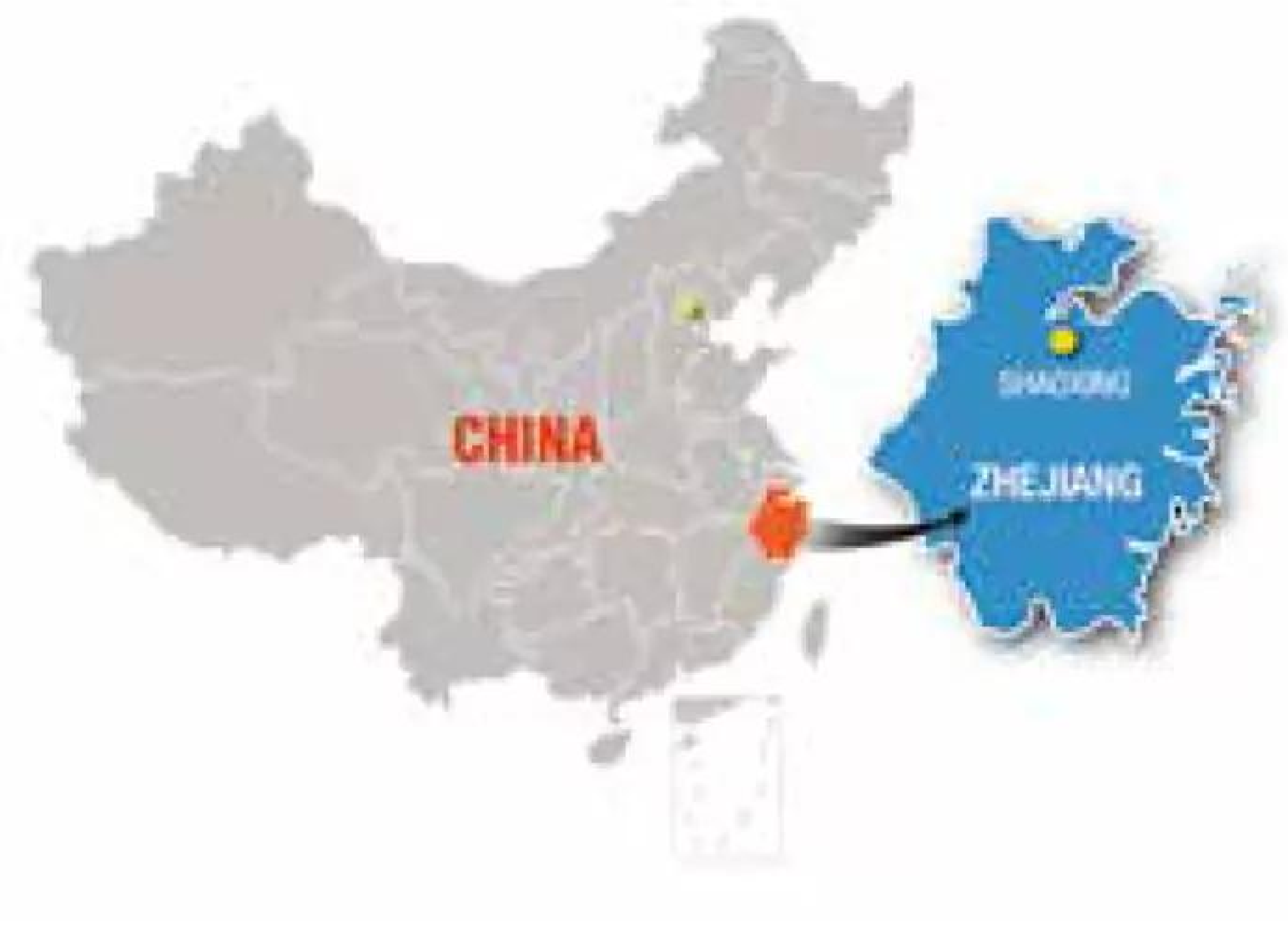
Poetic Visions

Shaoxing boasts a rich "water town" culture, typical of the Jiangnan region. In a way, the whole city itself is a kind of water town, crisscrossed by countless waterways that make for a somewhat kinetic driving experience as you bounce up and down little bridges. In spots where traditional architecture has been preserved, wooden houses with lime-washed walls crowd around canals, threaded by the narrow, slate-paved streets. Most days, those alleyways are slicked by the rain and mist hangs over the rivers. This scene, along with copious volumes of yellow wine, inspired many scholars and artists during the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279), making poetry, calligraphy and painting flourish.

However, Shaoxing's old city part is usually crowded with tourists and gimmicky "internet-famous" shops, losing the authentic feeling of the old water town. The best place to get a sense of what the city once looked like now sits a bit outside of the city centre. Anchang Ancient Town, in the northwest of Shaoxing County isn't too commercialised yet. Locals still live and work there, so traditional houses and lifestyles remain. Its mile-long market street is along the north bank of the canal, opposite residences on the south bank. Small shops line the narrow stone street, decorated with traditional lanterns and with shop names carved onto wooden signboards, or embroidered on banners. Local specialties like *meigan cai*, or preserved mustard greens, which are usually added to stews, are piled in bags neatly lining on the ground. Above them hang preserved sausages, salted duck and air-dried pig trotters. The famous Shaoxing stinky tofu is impossible for your nose to miss. Skillful middle-aged men deep fry it quickly, and ask you to dip the crispy-outside, tender-inside tofu into a spicy or salty soybean sauce.

You can also rent a traditional black-awning boat, punted along a local and sway your way through the water town. When the sun sinks, shops start to close and women squat down to wash their clothes and mops in the river. Old men and women take their after-dinner strolls, perch on the benches that run along the street and ponder the tourists. You might spot a group of middle-aged women gathering in the small square to dance to ear-splitting electropop. If you ask any of them where to dine, they'll send you down a small alley called Wangjia Lane, and suggest you order Shaoxing Three Delicacies, which is made of fresh meat balls, fish balls, shrimps and seasonal vegetables stewed in chicken soup.

A cartoon version of Lu Xun is displayed in the Hundred-Grass Garden, where the writer spent his childhood, August 4, 2024 (Photo by VCG)



Lu Xun Legacy

Shaoxing's most famous son is Lu Xun, perhaps China's greatest modern writer. Working in the early 20th Century, he penned the first vernacular novel in Chinese history, and his satirical and acerbic writing, deeply concerned with the ills he saw plaguing Chinese society, influenced not only other writers but even political movements. He's something of a mascot of the city now, and a cartoon version of Lu Xun, recognisable by his bushy moustache, can be seen on posters warning locals to be careful crossing the road, touting ice cream and on sale in stuffed form. What he'd write about this development is something we can only wonder about.

Much of Lu Xun's writing was closely based on his own experiences, especially in Shaoxing. Real places and vignettes of local life suffuse his work. His former residences, including the Three-Taste School where he started his journey into literature, and the Hundred-Grass Garden where he played as a child are open to visitors.

Although the city has abundant historical relics, you can take a break with a little natural beauty too. Keyan Scenic Resort, eight kilometres west of the city, bears the intriguing scars of ancient quarrying. The same stone that drew the quarrymen also looms in strange caves and steep cliffs. The most striking view is the 20.8-metre-high Tiangong Big Buddha statue, made when quarries were still operating. Carved into a natural pillar in the middle of a small lake, it took three generations of masons to craft, starting in the Sui Dynasty (581-618) some 1,300 years ago.

Keyan is also a great place to hop on a boat and enjoy the waterways that winding through small woods to Jian Lake. On the lake, you will feel the peace that Shaoxing's green hills and clear waters bring.★

Practicalities

The public transport system is well developed with two subway lines, a comprehensive bus system and rentable scooters.

There is no airport, but Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport is only 30 kilometres west of the city. There are three major railway stations in the city, Shaoxing North, Shaoxing and Shaoxing East, where you can take high-speed or standard trains to and from cities like Shanghai, Hangzhou and Ningbo in less than 1.5 hours.

Into the Bargains

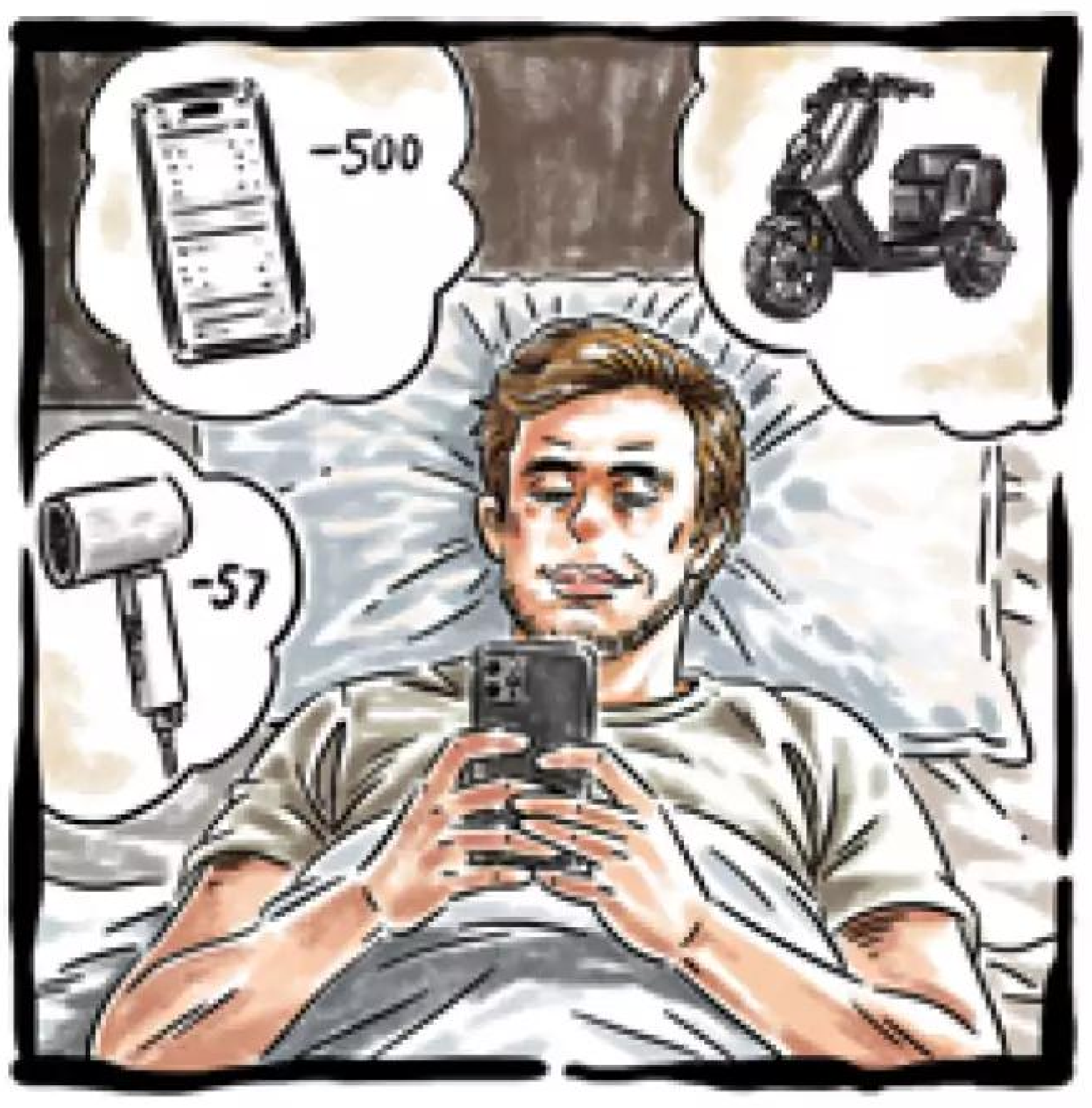
By Sam Duckett

In the dead of night, I lie wide awake in bed, the bright glow of the Taobao shopping app illuminating my face. With only six hours until my alarm goes off, I know I should put the phone down and catch some sleep. But China's new subsidies initiative for tech products has me buzzing with excitement – sleep can wait!

At the beginning of the year, China rolled out a consumer goods upgrading programme for electronic products, benefiting both local and foreign brands. It has been a hit with Chinese shoppers, generating over 70 billion yuan in sales by March. It's a trade-in policy, so you are meant to turn over old goods for new ones, but that seems to be very loosely enforced.

The size of the discount varies greatly from product to product, so it's worth looking around. For example, you might save around 500 yuan on an iPhone or 57 yuan on a Xiaomi hairdryer. What's more, the programme was recently expanded to include electric motorbikes (an item I have been eyeing for a while). It looks like these subsidies are here to stay, and I couldn't be happier.

When I first stumbled across the chance to snag major discounts during my next Taobao shopping spree, I'll admit I was sceptical. My first thought was, "There's no way they'll let me get in on this without a Chinese ID card." To my surprise, the policy extends to both foreigners and locals, creating a vibrant community of gadget lovers, all eager to show off our latest tech. This is opportune for a middle-aged manchild like myself who simply can't resist buying new toys.



I absolutely love gadgets. My enthusiasm, however, regularly sends my Chinese wife into a panic attack each time she sees me splurging on "more useless stuff." Maybe it's a touch embarrassing to be this giddy over a sale on tech products, but as someone who grew up watching classic James Bond films, I can't resist the allure of an "exploding pen" or a "laser watch." So, it's no shocker that thanks to these new subsidies I'm thrilled with my sleek electric motorbike, fancy headphones, and a soon-to-be reality: a futuristic looking hairdryer.

> As someone who grew up watching classic James Bond films, I can't resist the allure of an "exploding pen" or a "laser watch"

However, I was genuinely surprised to see this new spending policy be so popular among local consumers. In China, it's quite common to see families cut back on spending to focus on essentials like housing, education and private transportation. In contrast, my friends back in foggy London are revelling in lavish holidays and extravagant dinners, while casually admitting they aren't saving a penny. Truth be told, this is one of those time when I can sincerely say that Beijing has rubbed off on me for the better. While I still enjoy a good splurge, being out here has taught me restraint. There is a nice feeling in knowing that you are managing your finances like an adult. And most importantly, this frugal mindset makes my recent shopping spree that much more thrilling.

Now, let's jump back to the main topic: discounted gadgets. I've been practically bouncing off the walls at the thought of upgrading my household tech, but I do have a few reservations. An increase in technology purchases from one of the world's largest markets isn't exactly a win for the environment. Plus, does this mean we're accidentally encouraging even more screen time? It feels like phones are already glued to our hands 24/7. I can't help but wonder if, a few years down the line, we'll look back on this chapter in the bigger picture of what we need to do to reduce our reliance on technology.

But hey, that's a story for another day. Who knows how long this policy will last? I might as well enjoy it while I can instead of stressing over potential downsides. The timing couldn't be better, either! When I first arrived in China, the iPhone 4 was considered cutting-edge. Fast forward to today, and we're surrounded by smartwatches and virtual reality glasses. Living in a country at the forefront of tech advancements makes events like this feel even more exciting.

So fingers crossed for subsidies on domestic travel next, because all those trips await. Thinking about all this has made me way too excited to sleep, so I think I'll take one last look at JD.com before I finally turn out the lights.★

Super Granny

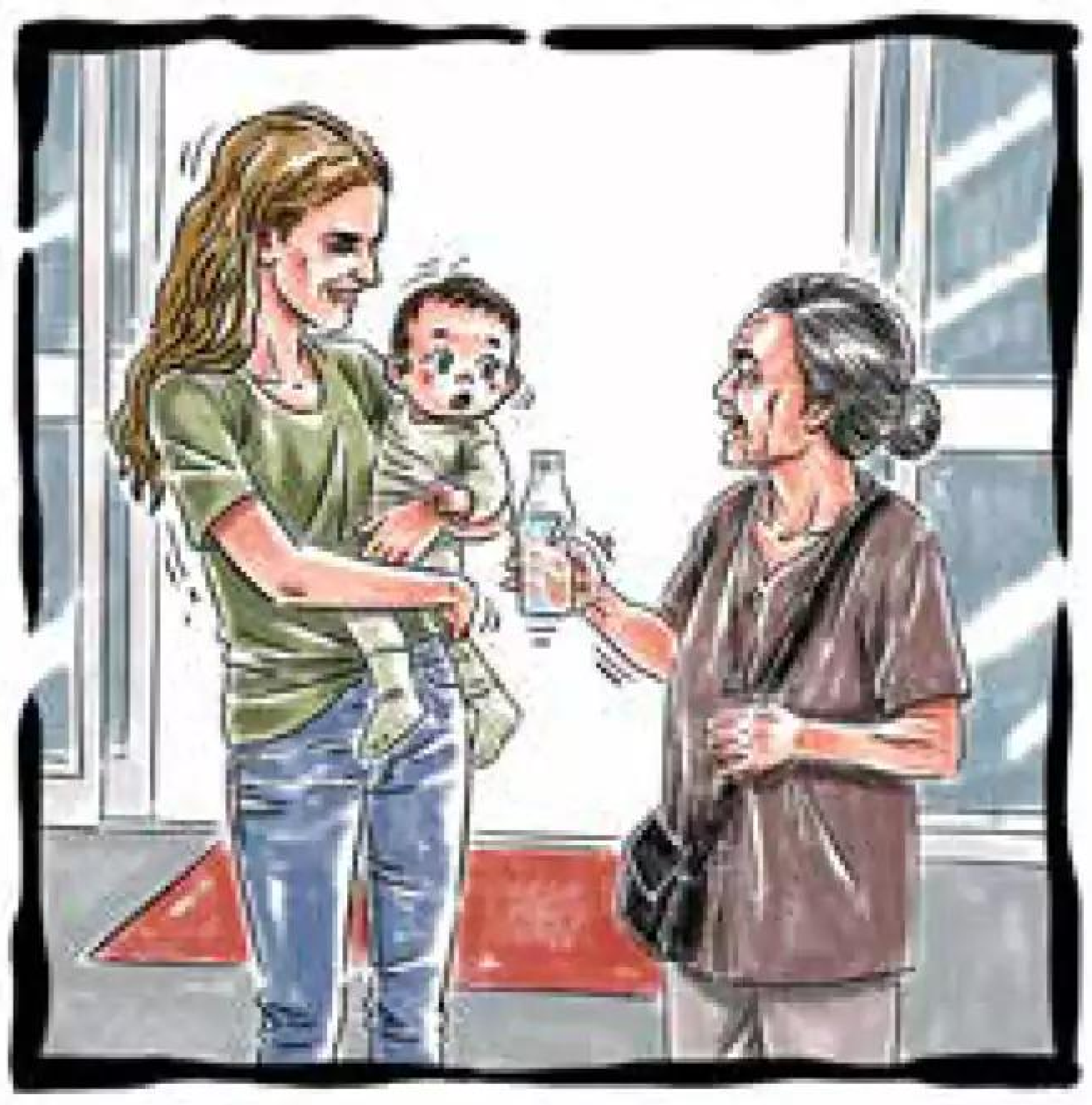
By Suzanne Robare

My Chinese mother-in-law looked like a fragile little lady, with tiny pretty hands and a laugh like the tinkle of sweet fairy bells, but she was tough as hell. Measuring 1.42 metres and weighing a good 40 kilos soaking wet, she continued to cycle to work at the military academy well past the age of 60, and was rumoured to have been on the Long March. (She never confirmed nor denied.)

I loved her from the moment I first saw her, jumping up and down at the airport, as she tried to catch a glimpse of her first grandchild. She jumped up and down for several hours, peeking through a small high window in the door that separated us: I was fine, but my husband had an issue which took Customs and Immigration some time to figure out. I stood in the hallway, surrounded by all our luggage, holding a 16-week-old infant, ready to pass out from exhaustion from a 36-hour journey, buoyed by the sight of that tiny white head popping into view for hours on end. If she wasn't going to give in to exhaustion, neither was I. When my husband (and our passports) were finally released, my mother-in-law did the loveliest thing ever: she handed me a jar of water, and asked if she could hold her grandchild. Asked! Not demanded! The woman had boiled water for me, put it into a recycled glass jar with a lid, then travelled from her home to the airport with that precious gift to hand to me at 2 am. Note: She didn't bring water for her son. Nainai (grandma) was then up at 5 am to cycle to her job, without complaint. That's a special kind of tough, and that's a special kind of love.

The woman had boiled water for me, put it into a recycled glass jar with a lid, then travelled from her home to the airport with that precious gift to hand to me at 2 am. Note: She didn't bring water for her son

And love was needed: Lord, I was stupid. A Chinese household in the early 90s was a different place to negotiate than one today. The washing machine (we were rich) had to be hooked up manually with cheap plastic hoses that constantly disengaged themselves from the faucet. We turned on the water, stood over the tub to make sure the hose stayed secured, turned off the faucet when the tub had enough (not full, just full enough), then set the timer to agitate the clothes. When it was time to rinse the clothes, the water was drained into enamel basins to be saved for flushing the toilet, then the wet clothes were pulled out and carefully packed around a spinning drum. The clothes had to be perfectly balanced or the spinner wouldn't work. After ensuring the spinning happened, the clothes were pulled out, put back into the tub, and the tub was refilled. Not only did she have to show me how to do this, but she didn't complain about the amount of water needed to wash Baby's diapers, and she let me have a second rinse as well.



She never raised her voice or belittled me. When I stepped backwards into a plastic bucket full of water, she laughed until she cried. She never complained. She never spoke about her life in the military, of being orphaned at 10, of her job, except to mention once how kind Zhou Enlai was. My Chinese was still at the *ni hao* (hello) level so I couldn't ask many questions, and my husband quickly tired of being the interpreter. I knew that she had served in the military at the same series of conflicts as my dad, albeit on different sides, and yet here was proof in the form of a sweet baby girl that love transcends politics. Still, I wondered at what point politics would intrude on our family life. I didn't have to wait long. I heard Nainai singing a lovely little tune to the baby. A family member tried to hush her, but Nainai replied, "She doesn't understand." (That would be me, not the baby.) My ears perked up: I couldn't make out the words, but I could remember the tune. Later, when I was alone with my husband, I hummed the tune for him: he almost choked with laughter, explaining between spasms that it was a soldier's fighting song from the Korean War era, which contained merry little lines such as "Kick the Americans in the ass and make them go away!" To her credit, she wasn't looking at me when she sang it.★

Probing the Alien Taste of Duck Tongue

By Mina Yan

I love sci-fi films. I especially like how filmmakers are able to dream up otherworldly creatures, and it's always baffled me how they come up with them. Where do these ideas come from? The inspiration has to originate from somewhere, right? One of my all-time favourites is *Alien* (1979), featuring the terrifying Xenomorph, a creature with a hidden inner mouth that shoots out to attack its victims. It's a classic, and it's terrifyingly awesome.

So why bring up a sci-fi classic? Well, a while back, during dinner at my friend's Peking duck restaurant, the chef served us an off-menu speciality reserved for close friends: braised duck tongue.

Before that night, I'd never seen, let alone considered eating a duck's tongue on its own. And if I had thought about it, I wouldn't have pictured what was on that plate. The tongues looked bizarre, almost extraterrestrial, like the Xenomorph's retractable jaws. Two long, curved pincers protruded from one end, while the other resembled a shriveled slug. And for such small birds, ducks have surprisingly long tongues.

It didn't look appetising, but under the chef's expectant gaze, I had no choice but to try it. Should I tear it apart? Are there bones, or was it all edible? I had no idea, but his proud expression kept me from admitting it was my first time. So I approached it like a chicken foot, nibbling for flavour rather than meat, cautiously chewing until I hit something too tough to bite.

To my surprise, braised duck tongue was delicious. And just as I suspected, there wasn't much meat, just a soft yet slightly chewy texture, like well-cooked tendon. Unlike mammal tongues, which are all muscle, duck tongues have a thin, U-shaped cartilage (a hyoid bone) that you discard after nibbling off the meat.

While duck tongue never became a favourite snack of mine, it's a staple across China and it can be found everywhere from Michelin-starred restaurants to night market food stalls and even convenience shops as grab-and-go treats.

Its origins likely trace back to imperial China, and like with most meats in China, no part of an animal went to waste. In the olden days, duck dishes were super popular during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties in places like Nanjing, Sichuan and Beijing, where roasted and braised duck were already beloved.

So if you ever get the chance to try duck tongue, I say go for it. Sure, it might look strange at first, even a little intimidating. But that's part of the fun. More than just sustenance, food is a way to connect with culture, history and even a bit of sci-fi fandom. After all, the most memorable adventures often begin with a single bite. And if it helps, just imagine you're a space explorer feasting on a Xenomorph.★

REALCHINESE

chū piàn

出 片

chupian

Photo-friendly, eye-catching photos

As summer holiday approaches, social media is buzzing with influencers sharing their favourite *chupian* spots, places that look amazing in photos. With *chu* meaning "to produce" and *pian* meaning "photo," *chupian* basically refers to anything that is super photogenic. Think dramatic landscapes, perfectly plated food or cleverly curated scenes, anything that helps rack up those likes.

Take Xizang Autonomous Region for example. With its dazzling blue skies, crystal-clear waters, and endless grasslands, it's a *chupian* paradise. Just point and shoot, and your phone will do the rest.

While no one's exactly sure when the term became popular, *chupian* has quickly become a key factor in how people choose where to go, what to eat and even what events to attend.

But not all that glitters is gold. Some folks are now creating the *chupian* effect rather than just capturing it. Filters, props or carefully staged settings can turn something plain (or even a bit tacky) into a social media gem.

That said, some netizens are pushing back. They worry that chasing the perfect photo has taken people out of the moment and into a curated fantasy, far removed from how things really are.★

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